

Engaging with learning opportunities for positive outcomes:
A study of post-secondary learners' experiences in a rural college setting

'Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Liverpool for the degree of Doctor of Education by Alice Wainwright-Stewart.'

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of students' post-secondary lived experiences at a rural college in Canada. My primary question was:

How do students, who have engaged with the learning opportunities at Prairie Site College, make sense of being engaged in these experiences?

The theoretical framework of appreciative inquiry (AI) was applied using the methodology of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to address the research question. Ten graduating students at a rural college in Canada took part in the study. To collect data the visual research technique of photo-elicitation and semi-structured interviews were implemented.

The study found that positive learning experiences include two key aspects that contribute to learner success: belongingness and authentic learning activities promote student engagement. Students that feel connected to their learning environment are more compelled to seek out new learning activities. Learners who experience practical, real-world activities understand concepts better. The outcome of combining belongingness and authentic learning promotes transformational learning thus providing learners with confidence to learn, grow, and develop positive self-esteem as well as experience transformational life changes.

The implications for professional practice in supporting positive learning in post-secondary learners include creating an atmosphere of belongingness where learners feel cared about, find connections and experience trust. Building an authentic learning environment incorporates support for learners and provides for engagement with others in real-world activities. Learners who experience this combination should experience personal change.

Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for any other award or credit at this or any institution of higher education. To the best of my knowledge, the thesis is wholly original and all material or writing published or written by others and contained herein has been duly referenced and credited.

Signature: 

Date: March 2018

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction.....	11
1.1 Prairie Site College.....	12
1.2 Prairie Site College Issues	15
1.2.1 Program surveys.....	16
1.2.2 College-wide student feedback.....	16
1.2.3 Graduate follow-up survey.....	17
1.2.4 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE).	17
1.3 Appreciative Inquiry (AI)	20
1.3.1 Appreciative Inquiry in higher education.	21
1.4 Study Purpose and Research Question	22
1.5 Summary.....	22
Chapter 2 Literature Review.....	24
2.1 Introduction	24
2.2 Belonging	27
2.3 Support for Students	32
2.4 Student-Faculty Connections	35
2.5 Active Learning	39
2.6 Summary.....	44
Chapter 3 Methodology	47
3.1 Research Rationale and Relevance	47
3.1.1 Research questions.	48
3.2 Adopting an Interpretative Position.....	48
3.3 Implementing Appreciative Inquiry as a Strength-based Approach.....	49
3.4 Choosing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)	52
3.4.1 Phenomenology.....	53
3.4.2 Hermeneutics.	55
3.4.3 Idiography.....	57
3.5 Justification of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as a	59
Methodology and Appreciative Inquiry as the Theoretical Framework	59
3.6 Researching My Students/The Insider Researcher	63
3.7 Summary.....	64
Chapter 4 Procedures	67
4.1 Selection of Participants.....	67
4.2 Data Collection	70
4.2.1 Photo-elicitation.	71
4.2.2 The use of photo-elicitation.....	72
4.2.3 Preparing for the interview.....	74
4.2.4 The interview.	76
4.3 Data Analysis	77

4.4 Describing the Process	80
4.5 Developing Themes	81
4.6 Value of Reflecting	85
4.6.1 Field notes.	85
4.6.2 Internal reflecting.	87
4.6.3 External reflection.	87
4.7 Ethical Considerations.....	88
4.7.1 Inform and gain consent.	88
4.7.2 Protecting the participants.	89
4.8 Fulfilling Credibility Criteria.....	90
4.8.1 Sensitivity to context.	90
4.8.2 Commitment and rigour.	91
4.8.3 Transparency and coherence.	92
4.8.4 Impact and importance.	92
4.9 Summary.....	93
Chapter 5 Findings.....	95
5.1 Master Theme One: We Belong.....	95
5.1.1 We experienced a friendly and caring place.	95
5.1.2 We found it easy to form relationships.	97
5.1.3 We felt at home.....	99
5.2 Master Theme Two: We Lived the Learning.....	104
5.2.1 We trusted the people in the academic environment.	104
5.2.2 We experienced meaningful knowledge and skills.	106
5.2.3 We developed pride and ownership in our learning.	110
5.3 Master Theme Three: We had Life-Changing Experiences.....	116
5.3.1 We were exposed to new ideas.	116
5.3.2 We saw our world from different perspectives.	118
5.3.3 Feeling supported, we altered our thoughts and actions.	120
5.4 Review of Findings.....	123
5.4.1 Belonging.....	123
5.4.2 Living the learning.....	124
5.4.3 Changes in life views.	124
5.4.4 Revealing new ideas.....	125
5.4.5 Findings from different campuses.....	126
5.4.6 Enhancing engagement, making changes.	126
Chapter 6 Discussion	128
6.1 Introduction	128
6.2 There was a Sense of Belonging	128
6.3 The Experience Was Real.....	133
6.4 The Experience Transformed Them.....	138
6.5 Leadership and Student Engagement.....	144
6.5.1 Setting direction for the institution.....	144
6.5.2 Developing people	145

6.5.3 Supporting sustainable performance	145
6.5.4 Ensuring the sustainability of the institution	146
6.6 Summary	147
Chapter 7 Conclusion.....	151
7.1 A Post-secondary Model for Positive Learning.....	151
7.2 Value, Meaning, and Recommendations for Professional Practice	154
7.2.1 The macro perspective.	154
7.2.2 The meso perspective.	155
7.2.3 The micro perspective.	156
7.2.4 Recommendations for professional practice.....	157
7.3 The Strengths of Adopting an Insider Approach.....	157
7.4 What I Learned Through This Research Process	159
7.5 Applying Photo-Elicitation.....	160
7.6 Appreciative Inquiry.....	161
7.7 Recommendations for Further Research	163
7.8 Increasing My Knowledge as a Practitioner-Researcher.....	164
7.9 Deepening My Understanding.....	164
7.10 Limitations	165
7.10.1 Limitations of the methodology implemented.....	165
7.10.2 Limitations of the nature of the site.	167
7.10.3 Limitations of being an insider researcher.	167
7.11 Summary.....	168
References.....	171
Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet.....	193
Appendix B: Consent Form	197
Appendix C: Test Interview	199
Appendix D: Master Theme Subsumption and Numeration	201
Appendix E: Interview Protocol and Questions	203
Appendix F: Subsumption	206
Appendix G: Glossary	207
Appendix H: Mapping Main Research Question and Sub-questions.....	209
Appendix I: Implementing Photo-Elicitation Within the Research Process.....	212

List of Tables

Table 3.1 <i>Different qualitative approaches, different questions (adapted from Smith et al., 2009, p. 45)</i>	60
Table 4.1 <i>Participants' information</i>	69
Table 4.2 <i>Analysis table (Adopted from Smith et al., 2009, p. 93)</i>	79
Table 4.3 <i>Sample how Master Theme Evolved from Emergent Theme, Individual to Group</i>	84
Table 5.1 <i>Master Theme One: We Belong</i>	95
Table 5.2 <i>Master Theme Two: We Lived the Learning</i>	104
Table 5.3 <i>Master Theme Three: We had Life-Changing Experiences</i>	116

List of Figures

<i>Figure 3.1</i> Appreciative Inquiry Model	50
<i>Figure 4.1</i> Andi's photograph of her home away from home	73
<i>Figure 4.2</i> Taylor's photograph of a new learning experience	73
<i>Figure 4.3</i> Jade's photograph relating to her academic journey	74
<i>Figure 4.4</i> Instructions for the researcher.....	75
<i>Figure 4.5</i> Listening to recorded interviews, developing transcripts & analysis tables. .	77
<i>Figure 4.6</i> Thinking about the individual participant themes.....	82
<i>Figure 4.7</i> Interview field notes	87
<i>Figure 5.1</i> Larry's bonding.....	97
<i>Figure 5.2</i> Miko's home	98
<i>Figure 5.3</i> Taylor's favorite place	99
<i>Figure 5.4</i> Alex's home away from home	100
<i>Figure 5.5</i> Mark's cool learning environment.....	101
<i>Figure 5.6</i> Jack feeling comfortable.....	102
<i>Figure 5.7</i> Enjoying the fun rodeo	107
<i>Figure 5.8</i> Holly's diagram.....	108
<i>Figure 5.9</i> The real lab	108
<i>Figure 5.10</i> Mark's student-managed farm experience	109
<i>Figure 5.11</i> Jade's field trip experience.....	110
<i>Figure 5.12</i> Andi's learning experience	111
<i>Figure 5.13</i> Andi's success	111
<i>Figure 5.14</i> Miko loves spending time at Prairie Site College	112

<i>Figure 5.15 Alex's learnings</i>	113
<i>Figure 5.16 Mark's sense of pride</i>	114
<i>Figure 5.17 Tom's friends made the difference</i>	116
<i>Figure 5.18 Taylor exposed to something different</i>	119
<i>Figure 5.19 Jade's sense of belonging</i>	123
<i>Figure 5.20 Students Living the Learning.....</i>	124
<i>Figure 5.21 Experiencing success</i>	125
<i>Figure 6.1 Connecting experiences to theory.....</i>	149
<i>Figure 7.1 A holistic model for providing positive student experiences</i>	152
<i>Figure 7.2 Mark's Prairie Site College experience</i>	160
<i>Figure 7.3 Alex's photo creation</i>	161

Chapter 1

Introduction

This study sought to develop a better understanding of the lived experiences of students at a rural college in Canada, and in particular, what engagement meant to the post-secondary learner. As president of the college, I was responsible for the institution's overall success. I focused on creating a sustainable academic organization and searched for ways to create a better place for learners. One of the issues I was curious about was our student retention. Prairie Site College (a pseudonym) statistics in 2015/16 indicated that approximately 14% of students who were accepted left the institution before completing their studies, and this range had fluctuated between 10% and 13% over the previous four years. This was a concern to me. Tinto (2012) argues that to understand retention issues, the "institution needs to assess student experience and its effects on retention" (p. 83). Furthermore, research suggests a strong link between student engagement and retention. Yorke and Thomas (2003) identified in their analysis of the Higher Education Funding Council for England performance indicators, six English higher education institutions where the "strongest common denominator" was a positive "student experience" (p. 67). They noted that student-centered approaches included experiences with positive student/staff interactions, supporting learners, and implementing pedagogical practices that enhance learning experiences. Crosling, Heagney, and Thomas (2009) in an Australian and global literature review on indicators for retention of learners, regarding their studies within higher education, suggested there is a relationship "between student engagement, the quality of student learning and the teaching and learning context" (p. 11). Moreover, they indicate "engaging students in their studies has been identified as important in retaining students" (Crosling et al., 2009. p. 16). In this study I aimed to understand more about our student retention issues; learning from the students about their academic experiences at Prairie Site College.

Thinking about my professional learning, I sought to create a new understanding of engagement at Prairie Site College with the intention to find factors that might

contribute to better retention rates. My assumption was learners who are provided with engaging educational opportunities will experience positive consequences, both academically and socially.

This chapter begins with the study's background including a description of the institution where I worked and my role within the college. The discussion then explores how the student experience is currently evaluated and notes how a qualitative method could complement the existing findings before the dialogue moves on to appreciative inquiry.

Chapter 1 concludes with the purpose of the study and its primary research question. The research was conducted at a small rural Canadian college that, for anonymity, I gave the pseudonym of Prairie Site College. I ensured that my ethical practices were outlined and adhered to thus obeying the policies of Prairie Site College, the University of Liverpool, and research policies affiliated with Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

There is a considerable use of different terminology, so a glossary has been devised (see Appendix G page 193).

1.1 Prairie Site College

With a 100-plus-year history, the college served over 8,000 students offering on-site and online programs within six different academic schools. The larger student body was made up of 18- to 45-year-old Canadians who attended on-site classes. However, from 2011 to 2017, the number of international learners increased to approximately 100 full-time students.

Prairie Site College is in the northeast area of Alberta, Canada. This part of the province relies heavily on agriculture. There are many large farms (5,000 to 10,000 plus acres) that grow crops and pasture cattle. This area is considered rural with the largest city a one-and-a-half hours travel by car to the west, and to the east, the nearest large city is three hours traveling by car. *Rural-ness* noted by populace was identified as “population densities less than 11 person/km²” as opposed to urban densities of 160

person/km² (Kmet & Macarthur, 2006, p. 123). Hofman, Filoso and Schofield (2005) indicate Canada's urban landscape has four major regions where half of the population lives. For Alberta, the concentrated population resides in its western corridor of the province between Edmonton and Calgary. To put in context, it would take a Prairie Site College student, travelling by car, one-and-a-half hours to get to Edmonton and five hours to get to Calgary.

Prairie Site College has two distinct campuses. Although there is a difference in the size of the towns surrounding each campus, Prairie Site learners within this study identified similar educational experiences.

Rural-ness for the college campuses means classes are smaller than institutions in the large cities. A lecture class size is less than 90 students; however, the lab cohorts average ratios of 20 students to 1 faculty member. Regulated programs, such as power engineering, have student/instructor ratios of 5 to 1. Another feature of *rural-ness* for Prairie Site College is that staff, faculty and many of the administrators are likely to know students by their names. As the president, I make an effort to get to know our students by hosting pizza lunches and speaking directly to each student who attends the lunch. Learners who attend Prairie Site College often live in residence and rely on the social fabric of the college.

Campus A is located in a small town of 5,400 people; although when the majority of the students are attending the institution, the town accounts for an additional 1,000 individuals. The college in this town is the largest employer. Half of the students live in residences and attend classes that are spread out in four adjoining buildings. The student body is mostly made up of learners who are attending full-time studies. Many of these students are active in clubs on campus. Campus A has a fully operational farm and emergency training site both of which the students take part in operating. Programming on this campus includes agricultural sciences, environmental sciences, human services, interior design, and eight different trades programs. Campus B is located in a border town that is half in the province of Alberta and half in the province of Saskatchewan. There are approximately 20,000 people living in this town, and the

significant economic growth in this town over the past six years stems from the oil boom. The college is this town's fifth largest employer. The town is home for many transient oil workers, yet the surrounding agricultural industry provides a large part of the area's household income. Campus B has many commuter students; some attend full-time studies while other learners are taking one or two courses while working at a job. One third of the students live on campus. The campus programs are housed in one large building. Programming on this site includes university transfer, energy, wellness, hair styling, esthetician, academic upgrading, office management, business, and a variety of continuing education courses.

The college forms part of the Alberta post-secondary system, a robust entity supported by regulations. Funded primarily by the provincial government, the system was governed by Alberta Advanced Education (Alberta Advanced Education, 2012). Each post-secondary institution was Board-governed, appointed by the Ministry of Advanced Education, and adhered to legislation identified within the *Post-Secondary Learning Act (PSLA)*.

From 1999 to 2017, I assumed leadership roles and was an active part of the team that directed the vision and operations of the college. Understanding the students' views was an important aspect of moving the college forward. As the president for the institution, I set direction, instigated policy, and mentored others. Supporting efforts to maximize student engagement plays a vital role in creating an inclusive learning environment where all students sense acceptance and are encouraged to participate. My career was dedicated to listening, appreciating, and sharing with others. My leadership style was both as a servant and appreciative leader (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012; Cousin, 2009; Greenleaf, 2002). As a practitioner-researcher working in the college system, I took a collaborative approach to finding solutions to create better environments for staff and students.

Being ultimately responsible for the institution, I sought to enhance the affirmative, create sustainability, and drive positive change for the institution. I believed that this would result in a quality education for students and stability for the institution.

1.2 Prairie Site College Issues

Responsible for the overall success of the college, I reported on executive limitations and was held accountable for the financial condition of the institution. Student retention was an important issue. The college invested a substantial amount of money and effort into marketing. With 26 post-secondary institutions in Alberta, there was real competition in attracting students to Prairie Site College. Along with creating brochures and visiting high schools within three different provinces, our personnel spent a considerable amount of time engaging in social media activities to promote the college. As well, our program staff was involved in campus and program orientations to ensure our students understood expectations. The students also made a significant investment in their education. Finding solutions to our student retention issues can provide positive outcomes for learners and the college.

As our student body became more diverse, together with the fact that many of our programs were closely linked to industry and driven by economic markets (Sadovnick, 1991, 2001), understanding student engagement was likely to be a complex endeavor. However, based on my professional experience, my intuition suggested that students' positive engagements in academic institutions were likely to create successful outcomes. I was curious whether the literature supported my position and whether my empirical research would also support this belief. As Kuh (2001) states, student engagement plays a major role in defining educational quality.

During my research into this topic, I noted provincial discussions within the Alberta Community Colleges had highlighted the need for *students to be engaged in their learning*. I was also aware of the use of the National Student Engagement Survey (NSSE), which at the inception of this study Prairie Site College was not implementing. This survey was implemented in post-secondary settings in various countries such as the USA, Canada, UK, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa (Buckley, 2013). In some cases, the original survey was modified. Nevertheless, the outcome was to receive feedback on student engagement. Prairie Site College did however implement five surveys to obtain feedback from students. These surveys focused primarily on

student satisfaction, job readiness, and feedback on course material. The surveys were two internally driven program surveys and three external surveys.

1.2.1 Program surveys.

Two types of surveys were administered internally by each of the six academic schools. The formal program surveys were managed through the academic department; anonymous feedback was received on course material, overall academic objectives, and student satisfaction. This survey intended to evaluate individual courses. The results provided faculty members with feedback about course material, measuring objectives, faculty conduct, and overall satisfaction. This information was helpful in understanding student perceptions regarding classroom dynamics, curriculum usefulness of textbooks, and feedback to faculty.

The second type of survey was an informal evaluation process. Faculty members were free to administer individually created questionnaires. This type of feedback targeted specific information that the faculty member was seeking. For example, a faculty member may hand out a short questionnaire to receive feedback on a new activity. These informal, anonymous surveys were not monitored through the college system.

1.2.2 College-wide student feedback.

The Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI) (Bryant, 2006; OIEA, 2014), a US-based survey, was paid for and applied at the college for many years. The leadership was interested in the students' perceptions of services at the college. The survey was implemented offering students the opportunity to provide feedback on items such as safety, security, instructional issues, academic advising, registration, admissions, financial aid, and campus climate. Students rated the level of importance for each these items and their level of satisfaction to how the institution rates. An interpretive guide provided instructions on reviewing data and suggestions for utilizing data. Students were surveyed in the spring, and data was discussed with the purpose

of improving scores in the fall. The results provided the college with feedback related to the food in the cafeteria, the lack of parking available to students, the poor conditions of the college residencies, the importance of hands-on learning activities, and the support for small class sizes. This survey led to improvements over the years.

1.2.3 Graduate follow-up survey.

A Canadian-based marketing research company (Insightrix) (Goodfellow & Harper, 2001) was hired to do telephone surveys with Prairie Site College graduates and then provided follow-up measures for the institution. This survey was implemented to understand what our graduates were doing for employment and where they were doing it. The results indicated graduates were employed but not always within their field of study.

At the onset of the Insightrix contract, questions focused on jobs. However, these issues evolved to focus on job preparedness, how college experiences prepared graduates for employment readiness, workforce skills, and satisfaction with the academic experience as related to career preparation. The most recent (2015/2016) results indicated students were satisfied with their coursework, and programs complemented job requirements. Data also indicated that small classes and engaging with faculty and peers enhanced student job success. Industry feedback indicated graduates with real-world experiences were preferred in the agricultural and environmental sectors.

1.2.4 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE).

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) was established in 2001 for colleges to complement the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). According to Kuh (2003), the NSSE was developed to examine the quality of post-secondary students' experiences. Historically, post-secondary institutions were rated by the institution's resources and reputation. However, with the growing evidence of the importance of student engagement, the CCSSE "provided high-

quality, behaviorally oriented data about the student experience that are related to student success” (Kuh, 2009a, p. 14). The CCSSE measured effective educational practices within five benchmarks. These were: “the frequency of students’ engagement in active and collaborative learning, the level of student effort that was applied to educational activities, the degree of academic challenge, the amount of student-faculty interactions, and the institutional support for learners” (McClenney, 2007, p. 139). Two years ago, the Prairie Site College paid for the CCSSE to be implemented. The results indicated similar items to those identified within the Noel Levitz inventory; students enjoyed small classes and found the instructors friendly and helpful. The survey differed from the NSSE in that it did not provide questions related to the student residence.

The quantitative nature of Prairie Site Colleges’ existing surveys assisted me in making some comparisons. Using the external survey, I was able to associate our overall students’ experiences with Noel Levitz benchmarks, while the internal surveys provided both the faculty and departmental leaders with data that can be analyzed and linked from year to year.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2010) suggest that qualitative and quantitative methods do not need to be “independent” or “mutually exclusive” but “must be seen as complementary and overlapping” in order to find solutions to complex problems (p. 5). Retention at Prairie Site College is a multifaceted issue. After reviewing our student retention statistics I was interested in finding out more about what lies behind these numbers. I saw Cohen et al. (2007) statements regarding scientific and social science research as being complementary, an opportunity to implement another approach to better understand Prairie Site College’s existing survey data. I felt a qualitative approach might add depth to our current facts. Implementing an interpretative method, listening to the individual stories of students from Prairie Site College, might enable me to bring to life what these numbers meant. I saw a qualitative method as a way to complement the statistical averages that have been already produced by the surveys Prairie Site College has undertaken.

Donovan and McKelfresh (2008) point out that there is a significant impact on students who attend college. I wanted to hear from the students what impact the college had on their lives. Micari and Pazos (2012) indicated student-faculty interactions could have positive influences on student learning. As I listened to the students' stories, I hoped to understand what type of positive influences faculty had on learners. I saw the face-to-face conversations with learners as an opportunity to understand their experiences.

Although my listening to student conversations was only an interpretation, I felt it could lead to a complete understanding of what students wanted from their post-secondary educational institution.

Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2009) emphasized that there is more to learning than the physical involvement and engagement in educational activities. As I listened to the students express their stories, I noted their body language as they spoke, taking into consideration their nuances as they revealed their feelings about their experiences. Bradbury-Jones, Irvine and Sambrook (2010) suggest the interpretative approach can be an empowering experience for learners. While Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) indicate this method allows participants the opportunity to **creaate** their stories. Although empowerment can be understood in many different ways, participants within the Bradbury-Jones et al. (2010) study felt empowered as they expressed their feelings regarding their experiences. For Prairie Site College students the opportunity to "give voice" (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006, p. 102) to each participant or allowing them to express their feelings was a way of empowering them to *make sense* of their experiences.

For these reasons, I chose a qualitative approach to address my primary research question. I was also interested in a strength-based approach that would highlight the positive experiences of Prairie Site College.

1.3 Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

Appreciative leaders understand the significance of listening and importance of engagement to build positive energy (Lewis et al., 2006). It is argued that past successes and analyzing what worked can create better places for students. I drew on the appreciative inquiry perspective for two reasons: firstly, my personal beliefs were that optimism begets positivity, and secondly, data indicated that focusing on the positive can make a difference in others' lives. Peter Drucker (cited in Cooperrider Whitney & Stavros, 2008) argues, "the ageless essence of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths in ways that make a system's weakness irrelevant" (p. x). Focusing energy on creating more positive experiences does have a ripple effect. Although problems may continue to exist, focusing on strengths can create more positive energy. I decided to only focus on participants' positive experiences.

In support of a positive approach to this research, I met the president of another local college to discuss the appreciative inquiry process. She indicated implementing the technique of appreciative inquiry built on their existing strengths and ensured that the stakeholders' contributions were an important aspect in developing their sustainable future.

Appreciative Inquiry is an approach that empowers optimistic interchange (Cooperrider et al., 2008), and this resonated with my leadership style. I was interested in exploring the positive aspects of the participants' experiences. There will always be opportunities to understand the problems that are experienced by students, and I am aware of the negative issues. Appreciative Inquiry is a proven model for positive transformations (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012) and targets the affirmative. Furthermore, our college had implemented an appreciative inquiry method for our institutional strategic planning process. This procedure proved successful over the previous two years. I employed appreciative inquiry within our Dean's Council as an approach to understanding what we did well. This pattern of thinking was refreshing as we explored our potential and sought to set directions for the college.

1.3.1 Appreciative Inquiry in higher education.

Cockell and McArthur-Blair's (2012) book, *Appreciative Inquiry in Higher Education*, notes the post-secondary institutions that have embraced this method have found positive solutions. For example, a Canadian institution implemented appreciative inquiry to bring together staff, students, and community members to envision the college in 10 years' time. Although Canadian organizations were mainly discussed, a few American institutions were noted for their positive results. The text also acknowledged individuals worldwide who utilized the appreciative inquiry process.

Saretsky (2013) introduced appreciative inquiry as a strategic planning tool for two community colleges to determine the effectiveness of sustaining the appreciative inquiry method. Leadership interactions were noted to play a significant factor in successful outcomes. Appreciative Inquiry as a practice is a way of thinking, and this takes time and needs to be nurtured to realize its value.

Appreciative Inquiry implemented as an evaluation process produced positive results in higher education as highlighted by Thibodeau (2011) who found appreciative inquiry promotes inclusive sharing experiences assisting people in feeling valued which produces better communication. A more recent contribution to appreciative inquiry used in higher education is Lynch's (2016) discussion on how this tool is implemented to promote a positive focus by centering on positive approaches to instruction, advising students, team building, and encouraging trust.

Thibodeau (2011) states appreciative inquiry provides open conversations, and this resonates with how appreciative inquiry evolved in the first place. David Cooperrider, as a doctoral student, was struck by the positive enthusiasm in the workplace where he was to conduct an improvement study. Because of the positive climate, he wanted to focus on the positive aspects of the workplace instead of the negative aspects. With permission from his supervisors, he was able to change his study to focus only on the positive aspects to determine what factors contributed to an already effective environment.

Similar to Cooperrider's research, our students' anecdotal records indicated there were positive aspects to our *live the learning* student experiences. The college's experiences of *live the learning* were hands-on-activities that replicated real-world experiences. Most of our college programs provided some activity where students participate in a real-world experience. An example of this was our students working together in teams to design elements in a new barn for the college. In fact, our student-managed farm received international awards and was featured in magazines quoting the students' experiences in taking the lead. I was interested in understanding the positive involvement of our students to find ways to create more of these opportunities.

1.4 Study Purpose and Research Question

The goal of this study was to develop a better understanding of Prairie Site College students' lived experiences. I focused on personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context for participants who shared a particular experience. My primary research question was:

How do students, who have engaged with the learning opportunities at Prairie Site College, make sense of being engaged in these experiences?

1.5 Summary

With the purpose to develop a better understanding of student's post-secondary lived experiences within the Prairie Site College, I was deliberate in selecting a strength-based perspective to assume the affirmative in this study. Appreciative Inquiry resonated with my inner beliefs that reflecting on the positive creates a ripple effect. As president, I heard more about the negative aspects of the college than the positive ones, and appreciative inquiry was proven to be a successful process in influencing the growth and development of our institution.

Student retention issues are directly linked to the student experience (Crosling, Heagney & Thomas, 2009); therefore, I wanted to understand more about student engagement. My primary research question was, "How do students, who have engaged

with learning opportunities at Prairie Site College, make sense of being engaged in these experiences?” To answer this question, I went beyond our survey results to focus on the students’ lived experiences and what they believed *being engaged* meant. As the president, I saw the value of engaging with others, hearing their viewpoints, and appreciating their stories. I believe listening to students was integral to finding solutions to our retention issues.

The context for this research study has been set, the purpose identified, and the research question presented. The next chapter will provide a review of the selected literature regarding student engagement.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Retention plays a major role in Prairie Site College's sustainability as has been noted in Chapter 1, "the student experience is often the strongest indicator of success" (Yorke and Thomas, 2003, p. 67). This suggests institutions that create ways for their students to experience meaningful engagement and plan for the diverse needs of their students, produce learning environments that enhance growth and development. To improve student retention I choose to explore the topic of student engagement to have a better insight into what is needed within the student experience at Prairie Site College. I undertook an intensive review to understand the tenets of student engagement. I started with the intent to understand what student engagement was within rural institutions as Prairie Site College is considered a rural college within Alberta. The college's rural context was explained in chapter one.

I reviewed the literature by identifying some texts that provided background on student learning, retention issues, holistic approaches to engagement, and educational contexts. These texts were *Completing College; Rethinking Institutional Action* (Tinto, 2012), *College Sense of Belonging* (Strayhorn, 2012), *A Learning College for the 21st Century* (O'Banion, 1997), and *Inquiry in Higher Education* (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012). The bibliographies within the previous books also provided further references. The literature assisted me in finding additional relevant work and resulted in my identifying the key terms of student engagement, lived experiences of college students, and positive post-secondary experiences. This literature was reviewed using the online library at the University of Liverpool and databases including ProQuest, ERIC, Ebscohost, the search engines of Google, Google Scholar, and DISCOVER. Relevant studies were also located through recommendations from colleagues. The search process was iterative. I found the stories told from a lived experience were the most interesting and provided me with specific detail related to what students find engaging. Seeking to understand the student's lived experience resonated with my primary

research question: *How do students, who have engaged with the learning opportunities at Prairie Site College, make sense of being engaged in these experiences?*

The search emphasis was on post-secondary engagement. Therefore, the National Survey of Student Engagement benchmarks provided a proxy until there was a saturation of themes. The chapter begins by linking retention to student engagement and follows by examining the key themes produced from the search.

Extant literature indicates the term student engagement in education is not new (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004; Carini, Kuh, & Klien, 2006; Krause & Coates, 2008; Kuh, 2009a, 2009b; Trowler, 2010; Trowler & Trowler, 2010; Johnson, 2013; Kahu, 2013; Van Uden, Ritzen, & Piters, 2013). The origins of this construct were noted in work done by Astin (1984, 1999) on student involvement, Pace (1984) on the quality of student effort and Pike (1995) on the student experience and achievement. Pascarella, Terenzini and Feldman (2005) extended this work by examining the effects of college on students while Tinto (2000) examined retention and student success. The concept of engagement has emerged over the last decade, “referring to the time, energy, and resources” students in higher education devote to activities that enhance their learning (Krause, 2005, p. 3). Crosley et al. (2009) linked the connection between retention and engagement signifying the student experience as a gauge to understand their success.

The corpus of student engagement literature was documented in different ways. Kahu (2013), in a review from New Zealand, indicated four approaches when identifying student engagement. The behavioral approach examines effective teaching practices. The psychological approach suggests engagement is an internal psych-social process that evolves. The socio-cultural approach focuses on the impact of the broader social context of the student experience, and the holistic approach draws together the experience of students becoming. This holistic perspective projects the important implications of the educational experiences on an individual and how profoundly the learner’s situated context affects the manner in which each student engages within the learning environment. In contrast, Vicky Trowler, from a British perspective, indicates

student engagement is a mixed bag of approaches ranging from a unit of analysis between individual students, minority groups, and at the institutional level. In fact, Trowler (2010), argues “what students bring to higher education, or where they study, matters less to their success and development than what they do during their time as a student” (p. 2). However, she does recognize the significance of the work done by George Kuh, Hamish Coates, and Kerri-Lee Krause.

Significant to work done on student engagement is the National Student Engagement Survey (NSSE) (Kuh, 2001). Originating from the United States, the focus of this work was on authentic evidence of student learning and effective educational practices. The survey became a tool to assist how students perceived their engagement in higher educational activities (Kuh, 2009a).

The NSSE was a new way to think about college quality, and the ideas behind the NSSE have become an international phenomenon. Five benchmarks identified what contributes to good educational practices. The benchmarks are: “level of academic challenge, student/faculty interactions, active and collaborative learning, supportive campus environment, and enriched educational experiences” (Kuh, 2003, p. 26). The original survey has been adapted to other systems with the intent to identify student’s participation in effective educational practices in countries such Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, China, Ireland, New Zealand, and South Africa (Buckley, 2013).

Hamish Coates (2005) has influenced student engagement in Australia and New Zealand noting when a phenomenon gets measured, the consequence is noted. As a creator of the Australian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), Coates (2010) argues the “statistical results” are meaningless without tools to improve practices (p. 2). As such, the AUSSE is recognized as the evidence-based assessment tool for higher education in Australian universities.

Kerri-Lee Krause, another Australian researcher, argues a comprehensive investigation through multiple lenses is needed to understand student engagement (Krause, 2005). Trowler (2010) reviewed over 1000 studies which also identified that

both the institution and the student must put forth an effort to ensure that there are positive educational outcomes.

Furthermore, Kandiko Howson and Buckley (2017) examined “subject differences” (p. 1141) and found that students had different ways of engaging depending on the subject that was studied.

Arriving at this point, I organized the literature into four main themes that contribute to positive educational experiences.

2.2 Belonging

The sense of belonging is “personal involvement within a system or environment; it is when the individual feels an integral part of the situation” (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992, p. 172). Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2008) define belongingness as:

Deeply personal and contextually mediated experience that evolves in response to the degree to which an individual feels: (a) secure, accepted, included, valued and respected by a defined group, (b) connected with or integral to the group, and (c) that their professional and/or personal values are in harmony with those of the group. (p. 2872)

Humans need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). According to (Kern, Montgomery, Mossey, & Bailey, 2014), belonging is an essential need “associated with feelings, cognitions, and behaviors which are motivated by the desire for meaningful interaction, acceptance, and value from others” (p. 134). Research is also exploring the links between belonging and well-being (Malone, Pillow, & Osman, 2012) while Mohamed, Newton, and McKenna (2014) report the lack of belonging has been associated with “stress, anxiety, and lack of esteem” (p. 124). Within the post-secondary environment, the sense of belonging is important in connecting the student’s positive feelings in both the social and academic aspects of learning (Strayhorn, 2012). The students’ sense of belonging, particularly in the early stages of college, is critical to their overall academic success (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007). Belongingness also encompasses terms like care, trust, and connections and certainly promotes

academic success (Bunkers, 2004; de Beer, Smith, & Jansen, 2009; Freeman et al., 2007; Hougaard, 2013; Levett-Jones & Lathean, 2008; Levett-Jones, Lathlean, Higgins, & McMillan, 2009; Zumbrum, Mckim, Buhs, & Hawley, 2014).

The sense of belonging was explored on campus levels within an American study of first-year college students in the non-majors of Biology, Psychology, and English courses. This quantitative study of 238 participants was undertaken by Freeman et al. (2007) to measure belongingness within the academic and faculty interactions. Although a mix of ethnic backgrounds was identified, the measurements were not able to decipher any particular differences between ethnic or gender preferences. The study aimed to understand the sense of belonging at the campus level. None of the measures produced the results related to the question. A contributing factor could be that the surveys were distributed during the last 5 minutes of each class period and the question “sometimes I feel as if I don’t belong at this university” (Freeman et al., 2007, p. 210) might not have been understood. Positive findings did confirm feeling a sense of belonging increases confidence, and social acceptance is enhanced with a caring faculty.

Despite the focus on increasing the students’ sense of belonging, a mixed-method study undertaken by de Beer et al., (2009) identified how students were underperforming even though they were receiving encouragement. Staff was caring and supportive. Nevertheless, participants found it difficult to overcome their feelings of being second-class citizens. Over 200 science students responded to questionnaires related to their campus, performance, private accommodations, and study conditions. Results indicated when students’ goals are not aligned, the behavioral consequences are negative. Because the participants felt disadvantaged, they focused more time on social justice issues on campus rather than their academic studies. The study did not provide the number of individuals that took part in the focus group interviews, nor did it provide the anecdotal data to back up its claims.

Within the academic nursing field, there is considerable evidence that there is a relationship between belongingness, the student, and their clinical placement. Levett-

Jones et al.'s (2009) mixed-method study included a quantitative portion involving 362 nursing participants from Australia and the United Kingdom. As well, the qualitative portions involved 18 nursing participants who were interviewed to explore factors that impacted student clinical placements.

The qualitative research results indicated that "feeling safe, comfortable, satisfied, and happy within the clinical environment" (Levett-Jones & Lathlean, 2009, p. 346) was a consequence of belongingness. Findings from the quantitative portion indicated belongingness varies depending on the situation and the environment. Further conclusions may have been gained had the academic program been separated by degree level.

Similarly, Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2009), in a cross-national (Australia and England) mixed-method study, used the same numbers as in the above study to examine third-year nursing students. Qualitative findings indicated belongingness is a crucial precursor to the student's learning and success. I believe this study's participants may be the same nursing students noted in the previous survey, yet there is no mention that the two studies are connected. Nevertheless, ethical discussions indicate proper procedures were followed. Findings followed similar references made in the previous research study to Maslow's hierarchy of needs and emphasized the importance of students feeling safe and secure within their clinical placements. Within another study, Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2009) identified a mixed-method study that also identified 18 nursing participants. The name of the article was *Don't rock the boat*. The participants were also third-year nursing students from three different universities, one in the United Kingdom and two in Australia. Although the introduction and background make particular reference to conformity, links were also made to belongingness. The research aimed to explore the factors that impact students' experiences of belongingness and the consequences of these experiences. The sample size identified that the students were recruited for in-depth semi-structured interviews. The same number of men and women were also recruited for this study. This study emphasized specific participants' quotes which identified the participants'

feelings of their treatment in clinical placements. Though the discussion presents a different theoretical framework, the impact on nursing students within the clinical placements also identified that when staff was friendly and welcoming, students felt more secure and confident in a clinical learning setting.

Human beings are influenced by their need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In an experiential learning clinical setting in Canada, participants identified perceptions of how their belongingness evolved through the clinical experiences. Kern et al. (2014) undertook a qualitative study involving 18 third and fourth-year nursing students. Results indicated students who were unable to secure belongingness perceived themselves as outsiders and as exterior to the nursing atmosphere. This study identified the significance of practical learning and described three dimensions of belongingness that were critical to students' belonging in a practical learning setting. The results reinforced the importance of belongingness. However, the number of students who provided feedback was convolved. Within the methods section, 18 students were identified as being interviewed yet within the sample section, 14 were said to have expressed an interest in being interviewed, while the results showed 7 of the 18 were enrolled in the third-year of nursing and the others were in their final year. Nevertheless, the study's finding indicated preparing for the clinical experience is fundamental.

Belongingness is viewed as the process of actively participating and feeling accepted (Osterman, 2000). Within an American action research project, Hougaard (2013) undertook a study with 15 participants finding that first-generation learners approach learning from a rote method and have difficulty in participating in collaborative methods. The researcher suggested learning in a community college should be more than job preparation. Learners *develop* by engaging in meaningful activities and collaborating with others. Significant to the nature of this study was the support for the minority student even though the research lacked identification of its ethical procedures. Reference was made to 10 to 15 students participating in the study, but the exact number of students was unknown although nine semi-structured interviews were noted.

The previous studies indicate that belongingness plays a significant factor in promoting academic success. To understand the concept of *belongingness within a rural academic setting*, I referred to psychological ecology. Barker and Wright (1949) state “every community provides a number of situations” which they call “behavior settings of the community” (p. 136). They note that a behavior setting is the “physical or social part of the non-psychological world” (p. 136). Anderson (1965) in her analysis of school climate literature notes ecology theory has a “mediating effect on school climate (p. 388). Ecology studies the relations between “habitat and function and population characteristics” seeking to examine “social groupings, interactions and ideological patterns” (Barker & Wright, 1949, p. 132). Prairie Site College, as a rural institution, in this framework, is a behavior setting.

Furthermore, examining the opportunities between small and large school settings, in terms of psychological ecology, Hill and Green (2008) imply “social climate of small schools encouraged participation and skill development more broadly and deeply than did the social climate of larger schools” (p. 186-187). In particular, Brown, Shepherd, Wituk and Meissen (2007) suggest that smaller settings “influence behavior and psychological well-being” (p. 400). Childs and Melton (1983) attribute rural settings are more conducive to a “sense of involvement” (p. 8) suggesting that these ideas follow Barker’s *manning theory* which indicates that there is more involvement and opportunity when there are fewer individuals (p. 7). Rural settings as indicated in Chapter 1 are considered to have fewer individuals than urban centers. Moreover, Childs and Melton (1983) connected *manning theory* with rural settings and suggested that individuals living in rural areas may have different social patterns. Prairie Site College rural students have identified the importance of small class size and their need to experience real-life learning experiences. I see a connection between the rural setting of Prairie Site College and belongingness.

2.3 Support for Students

Another important factor in promoting positive student engagement is providing students with the assistance they need to be successful (Kuh, 2003; Land & Ziomlek-Daigle, 2013; Tinto, 2012). As far back as the '90s, O'Banion (1997) referred to the importance of universal access to higher education indicating the post-secondary system needed to be prepared to support students in their search for knowledge. Support within the post-secondary context of this study means ensuring that there are provisions for learners (exclusive of policies already identified around making accommodations for disabled students) to assist them in pursuing their education and encouraging students to become more interactive in their learning environment.

Post-secondary learners have a variety of educational needs, and assisting them is important (Kuh, Kinzie, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). At times, students will have unique situations that require special considerations. Educators should be sensitive to the unique requirements of each learner and make accommodations when necessary. Zimmermann, Kamenetsky, and Pongracic (2015), in a Canadian qualitative study, examined the records of 2,105 students from the ages of 17 to 59 to understand who requested special considerations. Results indicated special circumstances should not be viewed as a generic process. Needs should be considered from an individual perspective; each situation and experience for these will be different for each learner. Therefore, each student's needs should be considered. The results and discussion section of this study indicated comparable results to both a British secondary school and an Australian university.

Surveys provide helpful tools in identifying what students need for support. Learning more about the students within the institution promotes success, and entrance surveys help determine the types of supports the new students need. An American quantitative survey undertaken by Brown (2012) involving 107 freshman participants found at-risk students by identifying cognitive and non-cognitive factors. Cognitive and non-cognitive factors have been identified as individual aptitude, family attributes, financial commitment, institutional and goal commitment, academic intentions, peer

relations, and self-knowledge. Knowing this evidence provided staff with the opportunity to develop specific orientations and address the needs of individual learners to develop an environment that encouraged positive engagement. Although the study was dependent on students responding, there is value in collecting this data.

College orientations provide another useful support for students. Leong (2015), in an American qualitative study involving 11 international participants from China, Sweden, Nepal, Cote d' Ivoire, and Afghanistan, found acculturation issues as barriers to overall success. Ensuring students understand the host country's academic and cultural expectations were necessary. Student handbooks that included academic expectations on how to engage in class, expectations in group discussions, and information on assignments enabled the international students to adapt and engage more successfully in academic activities. Handbook information was helpful to all learners and in particular for students who needed to internalize each expectation. Although the study sample was small and cannot be generalized, the recommendations provided helpful suggestions, and candid quotes offered an understanding of what students might be feeling.

Program-specific orientations provide a useful way to assist students in understanding expectations. Lipe and Walker (2013) undertook an American quantitative study involving over 2,000 freshman post-secondary participants finding a positive association between program-specific orientations but no agreement on the best method. Program-specific orientations offer ways to introduce expectations, and learners are more successful when they understand program requirements before starting a program. Learners feel encouraged and experience real success when they can envision the path to graduation. Orientations provide opportunities for students to understand expectations, be proactive, and create goals to develop positive outcomes. The researchers used available data which had been categorized by the Registrar's office, with sub-categorization based on retention and academic performance, instead of collecting this information.

Understanding what first-year students' need for support plays a major role in their future academic performance and success (Tinto, 2012). Hughes and Smail (2015), in a quantitative study from the United Kingdom, surveyed all first-year students through online questioning regarding their initiation week with the intent to identify what aspects of post-secondary life were most helpful to new students. The four questions over a 2-year period resulted in 92 posts. Findings indicated social support is important to create a healthy lifestyle, and a positive mindset encourages success. As well, students equipped with the knowledge on how to find the supports available at the institution appear to overcome barriers easier. Although the results provide a snapshot in time, students indicated that keeping busy, focusing on the positive, taking time to relax, making use of institutional supports, and socializing assisted in better transitions to post-secondary life.

Peer mentorship programs provide another type of support. Rawana, Sieukaran, Nguye, and Pitawanakwat (2015) undertook an Aboriginal Canadian mixed-methods study involving 12 participants. Findings indicated students who worked through social competence, ethnic orientations, and academic areas were more successful in persevering through stressful academic and life experiences.

Post-secondary environments that provided care, trust, and support for Aboriginal students promote successful outcomes. Although the outcomes provided similar experiences to those I am familiar with, the study's 12 participants did not provide significant data to identify as a mixed-method study. Furthermore, only eight participants were noted to complete the surveys. Data was also presented in percentages making it difficult to understand the actual number of participants that took part in the study.

College support includes thinking about the student's needs (Tinto, 2012). Support means providing for individual issues (Zimmermann, Kamenetsky, & Pongracic, 2015) and ensuring that there are a variety of transitions (Hughes & Smail, 2015). Orientation experiences (Leong, 2015) assist students in feeling more confident in their learning. Students that understood the institution and program expectations (Lipe &

Walker, 2013) and were provided with mentorship opportunities (Rawana et al., 2015) experienced positive engagement.

2.4 Student-Faculty Connections

For my study, connections between faculty and students are any class discussions or conversations where students are actively engaging with faculty members. Extant literature (Umbach, & Wawrzynski, 2005; Glass, Kocielek, Wongtrirat, Lynch, & Cong, 2015; Halawah, 2006; Tinto, 2012) highlights the importance of interactions with faculty throughout the students' learning experience. The words interaction and engagement encapsulate any situations where faculty can connect with students. Within this section, a discussion is provided on the importance of student-faculty interactions, the need for learners to engage in feedback sessions with faculty, and the significance of connections within the academic environment.

Faculty attitudes towards students are critical. Brinthaupt and Eady (2014), in an American quantitative study involving 171 college and university faculty participants, found that student/faculty relationships were enhanced when faculty made an effort to understand the adult learner needs, were sensitive to their needs, and made specific efforts to encourage learners. The online survey was administrated through email and represented all program areas. Although indicated as a good representation of faculty viewpoints, without providing the total number of faculty that were represented in this study, the findings might not support the majority of the faculty's viewpoints.

Bensimon (2007) described faculty as a key factor in supporting learners, encouraging confidence, and playing a significant role in community college students' success. Consistent with the preceding statement, Lundberg (2014), in an American quantitative study involving over 239 participants, found that community college faculty interactions with students improved learning and played a major role in social integration. The study also noted faculty interactions with students were the strongest indicator of learner success. The results indicate the statistically significant factor was

positive “faculty/student interactions both inside and outside the classroom.” (Lundberg, 2014, p. 79).

A significant role for faculty was facilitating and guiding students’ learning. Cydis, Galantino, Hood, Padded, and Richard (2015) reported on the outcome of creating a mutually supportive environment based on a mixed-method study, involving 19 selected faculty members and 111 student participants, at an American public liberal arts college. Results indicated that the learner-centered approach enhanced student success. The study implemented an interpretative phenomenological analysis process to capture the engagement of 111 students which is contrary to interpretative phenomenological analysis principles. The study followed a six-phase analysis of qualitative data identified by Braun and Clarke to narrow down themes. It was not clear if this process was followed for the faculty input or the quantitative portion of the study. Although written student statements were captured through a student statement analysis procedure, a content analysis process was noted for generating the themes. The body of literature discussed remains informative, yet the results are compromised by not aligning the research design with appropriate methods.

Student/faculty relationships were found to significantly affect the student’s motivation and learning (O’Meara, Knudsen, & Jones, 2013). Glass et al. (2015), in two American institutions, administered a qualitative study involving 40 undergraduates and graduate participants. Results indicated that international students with high academic preparedness engaged with faculty more openly than international learners who were less academically prepared. Although this study focused on international students, this knowledge is also relevant to the general student body. Insightful quotes supported the need to encourage connections between faculty and students.

Social interactions often begin with faculty-student engagements. Kozuh, Jeremic, Sarjas, Lapuh Bele, Devedzic, & Debevc (2015), in an international (Canada & Serbia) quantitative study involving 62 electrical engineering male participants, found a connection between social interaction and academic success. Results specified there was no link between social presence and academic success. However, there was a

strong relationship between social interactions and academic success. The all-male cohort may strongly influence the results. To gain a more accurate account of social presence and disciplinary communities, an extensive use of variables such as gender, culture, and academic status could enhance the faculty's knowledge regarding the importance of interactions.

Students want to be heard, understood, and encouraged in their learning (Pralle, 2016). Countryman and Zinck (2013), in a participatory action research study involving 20 university music immersion participants, found faculty feedback opportunities supported students and enhanced their sense of worth. Results indicated the importance of supporting and developing positive connections with students. Participants were engaged in interviews and small group discussions; however, there was no mention of their ethical process. The lack of consent compromises the study. Although there were references made to anonymously written reflections, the researchers raised the importance of reflexivity and attempted to establish a sense of ownership by inviting students to engage in regular student feedback opportunities.

Meaningful interactions between faculty and students allow the learner to understand, develop, and become empowered (Urquhart, Rees, & Ker, 2014). Part of the connections between faculty and students involves engaging in feedback opportunities. Urquhart et al. (2014) undertook a qualitative study in the United Kingdom. Implementing the methodology of narrative inquiry, 53 medical students identified their lived experiences in group feedback sessions. Three different researchers reviewed audio-recordings, provided notes, and worked independently on their initial theme creations. Narrative results indicated the need to provide interactive feedback sessions between faculty and students. This study failed to include how the ethical protocol was followed.

Students who were comfortable in approaching faculty members and felt respected experienced constructive outcomes. Micari and Pazos (2012), in an American quantitative study involving 113 STEM college participants, found building positive relationships between students and faculty was instrumental in providing

positive engagement. Although the study centered on a science perspective there were no results that indicated students embraced an academic discipline identity. The researchers also noted that in challenging courses, the student-faculty relationship takes on a special prominence. A right balance between genders was identified within this study, and specific details such as 99 out of 113 students validated the findings. Similarly, Komarraju, Musulkin, and Bhattacharya (2010), in an American quantitative study involving 242 first-year undergraduate participants, found faculty members who took an interest in their students increased the student's intellectual and professional development potential. The study profiled the percentage of cultural diversity and emphasized positive interaction increases self-confidence, motivation, and achievement.

Thomas and Eryilmaz (2015), in an American quantitative study involving 23 participants, found that the online social environment facilitated sharing information. This experience also strengthened classroom bonds and allowed instructors to engage in dialogue with students when needed. The constructivist design model provided for engagement within activities such as blogging, file sharing, creating sub-communities, and peer-to-peer networking. Making connections is an important part of learning, and implementing a theoretical perspective that encourages interactive learning promotes social presence.

Positive student-faculty interactions have been associated with increased effort, greater student engagement, and a higher academic achievement (Micari & Pazos, 2012). The context in which the connections take place has a significant impact on the students' learning (Meyers Hoffman, 2014). Proximity also influences the likelihood of forming relationships (Park, 2014) while students who are more familiar with the college experience form more connections and benefit positively (Wawrzynski, Heck, & Remley, 2012).

2.5 Active Learning

Active learning experiences engage students in real-life activities, and this form of learning dates back to Dewey (2004) and Piaget (1964). It has been argued that learners who are actively engaged in their learning make the distinction from knowing and doing which takes learning to a higher level of understanding as they reflect and think about their interactions (Kitchenham, 2008). Educators within the post-secondary sector have been curious about how adults learn and how it takes place (Moore, 2005; Taylor, 2008; Tennant, 1993). Although it is not a new term, Astin (1984), in his discussions on active learning, suggests students must be involved in learning while Chickering and Gamson (1987) noted learning should not be a spectator's sport. Prince (2004), in his review, suggests active learning is an instructional technique that engages students in the learning process.

While Grabinger and Dunlap (1995) concluded active learning stems from the philosophical background of the constructivist approach, implementing student-centered learning environments enhances the learner's ability to construct higher-order skills and reflect on consequences. Active learning opportunities provide a way to engage students with the learning materials by providing hands-on or real-world learning activities (Reeves, 2006). Lombardi (2007) refers to authentic learning as another reference that elevates active learning to encompass going beyond the content and "intentionally bringing into play multiple disciplines, multiple perspectives, ways of working, habits of mind, and community" (p. 3). As such, the favorable learning environments would include some simulated real-life situations, activities in role-playing, problem-solving activities, case studies, and learning communities.

In an active learning context, the learning atmosphere is welcoming and student-centered which sets the stage for learning to be cultivated. Active learning was highlighted by Severiens, Meeuwisse, and Marise (2015) in a quantitative study from the Netherlands involving 475 first-year business participants. Findings revealed student-centered programs promoted higher levels of peer engagement. Furthermore, engaging within a learning community provided opportunities for personal and social

development. Significant statistics were noted in the comparisons table emphasizing feeling at home, cultural congruity, effort, time spent, and engagement as showing higher within the student-centered environment. Nevertheless, GPA or grade point was higher within the lecture-based setting. Similarly, Scott-Webber, Strickland, and Ring Kapitula (2013), in an American quantitative study involving 130 college freshman participants, found classrooms that were deliberately designed to support student engagement increased positive interactions. Learning environments affect the learners' physical, social, and psychological being, and spaces that are created to promote student engagement include collaborative areas with activities about real-life scenarios. The design of the learning environment contributes to classroom dynamics and supports positive student engagement. The study's significance indicated higher scores on the post-test scores after the new classroom layout was implemented.

Active learning plays a major role in fostering academic performance which includes thinking, questioning, and engagement (Freeman, Eddy, McDonough, Smith, Okoroafor, Jordt & Wenderoth, 2014). Lukowiak and Hunzicker (2013), in an American qualitative study involving six college participants, found that ideal learning occurs when the student's attention is captured, and higher order thinking is magnified through interactive learning experiences. The study was identified as a phenomenological self-study which incorporated six participants who provided data for the group feedback sessions. Also incorporated was data from secondary research which included 45 participants who were involved in an introductory course in curriculum design. The purpose of self-study was to understand college student engagement better and examine how and why students engage in learning. The study was difficult to follow. As well, data from the 45 participants reflects a mixed-method study rather than a phenomenological self-study.

Hands-on or concrete forms of learning assist the science student in understanding difficult concepts. American researchers Freeman et al. (2014) conducted a literature review of 225 studies to understand the performance scores of students in undergraduate science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).

Results indicated the average science examination scores improved by 6% when students were involved in some type of experimental activity. Nevertheless, being engaged in group activities or tutorial sessions improved students' grades regardless of the experimental activities. Student involvement is noted as an important contributor to student success within science coursework. Results were significant to the 2012 President's Council of Advisors on science and technology whose call for action was a 33% increase in STEM scores per year.

The constant dropout rate was also noted in another American author's college science courses. Rates were so significant that faculty was encouraged to re-examine their teaching methods and seek more student engagement opportunities. Instructors instigated a workshop to examine how courses were conducted. The workshop resulted in creating a different way to present course material. Metoyer, Miller, Mount, and Westmoreland (2014) conducted workshops with 30 to 100 college participants implementing team-based learning (TBL) within the science curriculum. Creating strategically formed learning teams and changing the traditional science curriculum provided learners with opportunities to enhance thinking skills. Positive team interactions promoted student engagement. Significant to this study was the forming of teams and implementing immediate feedback.

An interactive video exercise sustained adult learners' interest in Taylor, Dunn, and Winn's (2015) American mixed-method study involving over 800 online degree completion college participants. The voice-over video interactive study provided a positive way to deal with the issues experienced by students. Although the study indicated that it was both quantitative and qualitative, there were only surveys administered. Researchers identified the first survey questions providing a 100 point scale (0 strongly disagree to 100 strongly agree) to assess six items on the survey; this was recognized as the quantitative portion of the study. The final two surveys were noted as open-ended responses; this part was designated as the qualitative part of the survey. Nevertheless, the withdrawal rates after the implementation of the interactive

videos decreased by 12.6%. Statistically significant were the positive changes within the mid to upper courses in biology and humanities.

Similarly, Chen and Chiou (2014), in a quasi-experimental design study in Taiwan involving 140 undergraduate Child Development sophomore participants, found the hybrid course, blending face-to-face with online discussion and reflective activities, provided a strong sense of community. Statistically significant was the result that the hybrid group had substantially higher learning scores and satisfaction than students in the face-to-face course. Likewise, developing social skills through interactive activities provides a positive form of active learning. Braxton, Willis, Hirschy, and Hartley (2008), in a quantitative longitudinal study involving over 400 first-year college participants, found collaborative activities improved social integration. Active learning has a positive impact on the students' levels of social interactions and their awareness of institutions commitment.

Real-world experiences enhance student understanding and engagement (Braxton, Milen, & Shaw Sullivan, 2000; Onorato, 2014). Ross, Mahal, Chinnapen, Kolar, and Wooden (2014), in a Canadian qualitative study involving 11 third-year nursing participants, found meaningful clinical settings supported positive engagement. Clinical experiences assisted students in gaining compassion and understanding: issues that cannot be replicated in a classroom setting. These context-rich placements provided students with the opportunities to engage with real people and understand real work. The study provided valuable data to understand the significance of students separating their preconceived notions and judgments of mental health.

Real-world learning opportunities resonate with Dennen (2003) who noted the importance of cognitive apprenticeship as a form of active learning. According to Collins, Brown, and Holum (1991), the cognitive apprenticeship environment supports *experts* and *novices* interacting within an authentic learning experience to focus on cognitive skill development. Skills can be highlighted by coaching the student, thinking aloud, and watching and scaffolding when needed (Collins et al., 1991). Kellogg (2008) argues activities like writing skills are best developed through a cognitive apprenticeship

model because of the need for continual practice for competency. As such, skills that require an individual to become an expert require skill mastery, and this takes time to develop.

Raghallaigh and Cunniffle (2013), in a mixed-method study undertaken in Ireland involving 520 third-year social science participants for the quantitative portion and nine third-year social science participants for the qualitative portion, found experimental learning activities improved students' interviewing skills and promoted affirmative commitment. Students who experienced the opportunity to "do" learned more and became deeply involved in the experience. The qualitative portion of the study was well documented. The quantitative portion identified specific words to describe their learning experience. There were no statistically significant findings identified.

Social networking as a learning technique provides opportunities for active learning. Buchenroth-Martin, DiMartino, and Martin (2017), in an American quantitative study involving 115 first-year biology participants, found social networking within a large evolutionary biology classroom increased knowledge. Students in this learning environment were not designated to specific groups. Learners were able to move freely from one group to another. This activity allowed students to network often contributing to creative ideas and creating connections with other team members. Social networking opportunities resulted in positive student engagement. The study noted gender differences; female students with a lower grade point average (GPA) did poorer in the course than male students with similar grade point averages. The study also noted how teacher assistants kept track of the student movement and charted their engagements.

Active learning research identifies that students are not passive vessels to place information within. Instead, the learners are viewed as active thinkers who are engaged within the learning setting. The instructor, who realizes this, plans and prepares the learners to discover and construct their knowledge through meaningful active learning experiences. Such opportunities find the students engaging positively in the learning environment.

2.6 Summary

As a leader in a rural college, who was concerned about our institutional retention rates, I sought to make sense of this problem by examining a number of studies. I found literature that linked retention with student success (Thomas, 2002; Yorke & Thomas, 2003; Yorke, 2006; Crosling, Heagney & Thomas, 2009).

Higher retention rates were noted when the student had a positive experience while attending an institution. The relationships learners made with their classmates, staff attitudes, socially interactive learning experiences, and authentic feedback sessions were all contributing factors to successful educational experiences. Thomas (2002) refers to these experiences as 'institutional habitus' or, in other words, "the willingness of institutions to embrace and value diversity" (p. 459). This would suggest that the culture an institution displays towards its students would make a difference in the organization's retention rates.

Yorke and Thomas (2003) note that student retention success was directly related to the "deliberate actions" (p. 72) the institution took. Creating a friendly environment that supported the students' development in various ways helped learners feel included. Meaningful formative assessment improved student understanding, and focusing on first-year students was critical to retention efforts.

Yorke (2006) concludes that institutions need to be committed to learning and teaching. Faculty should be encouraged to create opportunities that develop student interactions and provide strategic learning approaches to assist each learner. There are many ways the institution can support the concept of teaching and learning for improving retention. Crosling, Heagney, and Thomas (2009) state student-centred approaches can assist the new learner in understanding the expectations and the culture of the institution. New students who were introduced to other students early in their studies felt more comfortable in the learning environment and noted a sense of belonging.

Kuh (2001) linked student success with engagement and identified the NSSE as a way to measure the student's perception of their engagement within a post-secondary

institution. Extant literature suggests that positive student engagement is complex (Kahu, 2013; Krause, 2005; Kuh, 2001; Trowler, 2010). As president, I believe fostering student engagement will enhance the student experience and boost our retention rates.

There are many components to consider when creating and supporting an educational atmosphere that enhances the student experience. Most noteworthy is the NSSE benchmarks (Kuh, 2001) on student engagement. The five benchmarks acknowledged what is involved in good educational practices. The NSSE has been incorporated or modified in many countries to enhance the student's experience in higher education. Krause (2005) notes the importance of viewing student engagement through multiple lenses to ensure the student experience is holistic. The NSSE benchmarks were my proxy to ensure I captured the essence of student engagement. Themes that emerged from this process were belonging, supports for students, student/faculty connections, and active learning.

Belonging plays a central role in the human being's existence (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The students' sense of belonging, particularly in the early stages of college, is essential to their overall academic success (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007) which is a fundamental need (Kern, Montgomery, Mossey, & Bailey, 2014).

Universal access has changed higher education, and post-secondary educators should be prepared to support students in their pursuit of knowledge (O'Banion, 1997). Without academic and social support, students would find it difficult to succeed in their academic fields (Tinto, 2012). Literature confirms the importance of student orientation to campus life, taking the time to prepare students for successful educational experiences, and providing them with a sense of care.

Faculty-student connections are integral to how well the student adjusts to academic life (Meyers & Hoffman, 2012). Positive faculty interactions contribute to student success by assisting learners to feel connected while improving their overall self-confidence (Glass et al., 2015).

Active learning experiences engage students in real-life activities, and this form of learning dates back to Dewey (2004) and Piaget (1964). Students who experience

this type of learning are actively pursuing knowledge rather than passively listening to a lecture (Buchenroth-Martin, DiMartino, & Martin 2017). Students' educational experiences impact how they construct knowledge and personal meaning. Positive outcomes are possible when the educational environment engages learners. For successful academic outcomes, the learner and the institution need to contribute to the learning process. When the institution creates a welcoming environment that is open to student input, it provides an atmosphere that reflects a shift in the learning experience. This learner-centred approach encourages the student to take control of his/her learning process while the academic staff facilitates the educational experience. Students need to be actively involved in the learning process and engage in meaningful feedback to experience positive growth and development.

The review of student engagement literature identifies the range of factors associated with positive student engagement noting its widespread reach in the international world. Student engagement is an individual pursuit. I see a gap in the literature regarding the rural Canadian college student experience. It is to this end that I pursued my research study which was to understand more about the student's experiences at Prairie Site College.

The next chapter identifies the methodology I implemented to understand positive student engagement within my educational setting.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Research Rationale and Relevance

Choosing a qualitative perspective provides the opportunity for students at Prairie Site College to tell their stories. This was important as I wanted to learn more about what students were experiencing at the institution. I felt an interpretative method would provide a useful context to understand what Prairie Site students found engaging which would ultimately provide some solutions to our retention issues.

Existing research indicates that the student experience is a significant factor in academic success. Many aspects were acknowledged as important to the student experience and these require input from both the learner and the institution. Key highlights indicated that the learning environment should include experiences which provide students with a sense of belonging, supports, interactions with instructors and engaging learning activities. This research presented me with an overview about what was essential to a positive student experience. However, I noted in Chapter 1 that much of the research was quantitative by nature. The existing literature does not tell me how students make sense of their daily flow of experiences when studying at a rural college, nor does it identify which experiences were significant in terms of engaging with the institution. My study was focused on the rural learner's specific engagement within rural college setting.

The objective of this research was to design a study that focused on the positive learning experiences of rural college students (Cockell & McAthur-Blair, 2012). As well the study would provide a creative approach to data collection which was both empowering (Hill, 2014) and engaging (Kuh, 2001; Webber, Krylow, & Zhang, 2013; Zepke & Leach, 2010) students with the intent to fill the gap in the literature related to the rural student's lived experiences.

3.1.1 Research questions.

My research investigated and answered the following questions:

- My primary question was: “How do students, who have engaged with the learning opportunities at Prairie Site College, make sense of being engaged in these experiences?”
- When students recall their experiences at Prairie Site College, what is important to them?
- What significant factors in academic programs do students identify as engaging?

3.2 Adopting an Interpretative Position

Brannick and Coghlan (2010) argue the researcher plays an essential part in the interpretative study. In other words, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) suggests reality by both the researcher and the participant is constructed. Taking this perspective, I do not claim to describe the phenomenon purely but rather make sense of my participants' *sense-making*. As such, what I can know then is what I interpret. My findings then will be a co-construction between me, the researcher, and the participants that I interviewed.

My *making-sense* process is influenced by my position on how knowledge is constructed. I believe reality *becomes* as people interact with each other and *make sense* of their interactions. There will always be multiple realities; even though two different people experience the same activity, each viewpoint will be different depending on his/her locally situated perspective (Smith, 2004; Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). Hence, an individual's viewpoint is always subjective (Smith et al., 2009). I argue that individuals will mentally and socially construct reality which may change with emotions, preferences, cultural expectations, gender, situations, and different moments in time.

I believe that human nature goes beyond responding automatically to the environment (determinism) while also not independently (voluntarism) responding to the environment (Depelteau, 2008). I see human beings as mentally and socially constructing their reality in every moment they live. Humans develop their responses

and are influenced and pressured by the social standards of the culture in which they live. Within this research project, although I should attempt to remove preconceived notions, my analysis will be formed by my personal experiences and perceptions. The reality for each individual is a creation of the mind and a personal interpretation of the individual's situated world (Smith et al., 2009). This point is illustrated by Denzin and Lincoln (2011):

Behind these terms stands the personal biography of the researcher, who speaks from a particular class, gender, racial, cultural, and ethnic community perspective. The gendered, multiculturally situated researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology), that specifies a set of questions (epistemology), which are then examined (methodology, analysis) in specific ways. Every researcher speaks from within a distinct interpretive community. (p. 11)

Thus, findings in this research were co-constructed between the participants and me, the researcher. I used reflection as a helpful tool to understand, seek clarification, and be more mindful of what I interpreted. The process of reflexivity becomes an ongoing personal examination of knowledge construction (Guillemin & Gillian, 2004). I found this process helpful in understanding my bias, considering my role from within this research, as well as attempting to understand the perspective of each participant (Hellowell, 2006).

I wanted to be in unison with my values, beliefs, and practices. To achieve this, I was drawn to an approach known as appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider et al., 2008; Cooperrider, 2012).

3.3 Implementing Appreciative Inquiry as a Strength-based Approach

I used appreciative inquiry but not in the sense of action research; instead what I have done is use the tenets of appreciative inquiry to guide my thinking and the way in which I constructed and asked my questions when interviewing the participants. I saw myself as a research instrument, steeped in the appreciative inquiry concepts to improve myself as a practitioner-researcher, whose aim was to make the world a better place for the students who attended Prairie Site College.

Appreciative inquiry is a strength-based focus engaging in what is real. Developed in the 1980s out of David Cooperrider and others' work, appreciative inquiry provides an avenue to give voice and insight, build on the positive, and dream of the possibilities. Accordingly, to Cockell and McArthur-Blair (2012), appreciative inquiry has been successfully implemented within the higher education sector. Appreciative inquiry is a different perspective focusing on the positive rather than highlighting the negative (Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2012). Based on the principle that institutions move in the direction of what they study, focusing on the positive will beget more affirmative action. Below is Ludema, Cooperrider, and Barrett's (2012, p. 3) suggested model of appreciative inquiry.

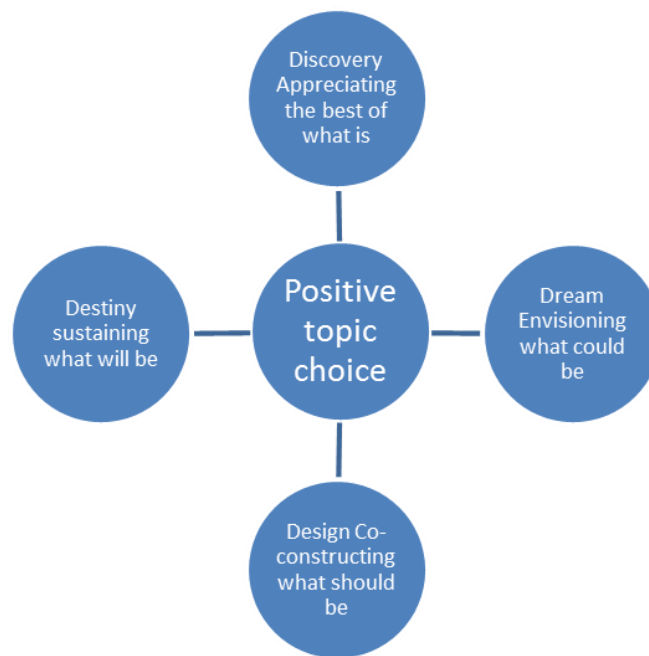


Figure 3.1 Appreciative Inquiry Model

The first phase, discovery, focuses on the best of what is highlighting the ideas that promote growth. The second phase, dream, seeks to envision what could be. The third phase, design, aims to create the future through understanding what might be.

The fourth phase, destiny, seeks to build the future by generating ideas and then creating a plan to implement the best ideas.

Ludema et al. (2012) identified that implementing appreciative inquiry starts with positive questions to build positive thinking. For example a question such as “What is the best experience you have had working with other classmates?” focuses on positive activities building on what students enjoyed. Ludema et al. (2012) contend that by asking positive questions, innovative ideas evolved whereas focusing on critical questions often undermines any positive movement.

Concentrating on the affirmative also highlights that there are many ways of understanding the future which can be full of positive possibilities.

By embracing the concept of appreciative inquiry, I was acutely aware that I would be subjective in taking an interpretive approach (Saretsky, 2013). I was mindful of the fact that not favoring objectivism implies I would not seek a rigorous scientific method. Instead, as Bushe (2011) suggests, I was not looking for a diagnosis as I listened to the students. Instead, I was encouraging dialogue from a personal perspective. Although many of our college systems have implemented a problem-solving approach, I agree with Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) who argued that the problem-solving processes are counterproductive in social innovation exercises.

I was aware of the criticisms of appreciative inquiry and the descriptions that this perspective might be “too excessively focused on the warm fuzzy group hugs” (Grant & Humphries, 2006, p. 404), yet I saw the process as an opportunity to bring forward the affirmative. I believed in developing appreciation through co-construction. Furthermore, I embraced the technique of reflexivity which suited my beliefs to be more aware of a sound holistic approach to life.

Appreciative inquiry method is not an isolated event. Exploring possibilities through the appreciative inquiry method often produces further investigations (Saretsky, 2013) based on the idea that a positive approach produces positive results. Implementing the core philosophy behind appreciative inquiry, I searched for what would generate the best in the students’ college experiences and bring out the best in

these (Gergen, 1978). The appreciative inquiry process not only seeks the positive, “it is a way of being and seeing the world every day” (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012, p. 13).

As the researcher-practitioner, an instrument within this study, I found the four phases of appreciative inquiry a useful model to implement. The discovery phase allowed me to discover the research methodology that best aligned with my research question. The dream phase continued throughout the research as I dreamed about closing the gap in the literature and creating a better place for the Prairie Site College students. The design phase unfolded as I developed the procedures and data collection process while phase four destiny was realized as the findings emerged.

3.4 Choosing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

As president of the institution and the researcher of this study, I wanted to understand how students were making sense of their lived experiences at the college. I wanted to listen to the participants’ rich idiographic stories. Researchers using an interpretive method are interested in individual experiences (Gardner, 2011), and phenomenology is about how people experience things (Pettit, 2012). Choosing a qualitative approach, I embarked on an interpretative phenomenological analysis which focuses on making sense of what the participants were making sense of (Smith et al., 2009) because this methodology best resonates with my research question.

The interpretative phenomenological analysis is a particular approach to qualitative research “which represents an epistemological position, offers a set of guidelines for conducting research, and describes a corpus of empirical research” (Smith, 2004, p. 40). According to Smith et al. (2009), it is impossible to examine pure experience; getting close to participants is the only way to understand them better. Cousin (2009) indicates closeness is gained by enabling participants to feel comfortable, so they can express their feelings. The interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology was founded by Jonathan Smith in the 1990s and incorporated the principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography.

These principles will now be discussed.

3.4.1 Phenomenology.

Phenomenology is the study of the lived experience. I refer to two phenomenological theorists who approach the understanding of a person's lived experience differently. Heidegger (1953/1996) connects experience, expression, and understanding (Zahavi, 2003) while Husserl, the founding father of phenomenology, attempts to understand an individual's *lifeworld* by focusing on what is directly in our consciousness (Dowling, 2007). Both theorists have influenced interpretative phenomenological analysis, yet I favor Heidegger's approach to interpretation. He realizes the importance of the role of the researcher's influence in the research process whereas Husserl stressed the process of "bracketing" meaning the researcher should remove all preconceptions to focus on "the essence of experience" (Dowling, 2007, p. 136). I prefer to implement "reflexivity" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 275) as this suggests examining the research process in my attempt to experience closeness rather than bracketing or trying to remove all my preconceptions.

Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre are the four phenomenological thinkers that provide background for interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

Husserl argued the importance of "going back to the things themselves to better understand the phenomenon at hand" (as cited in Smith et al., 2009, p. 12). Husserl (1989/1990) indicated day-to-day activities are often taken for granted by most people. He suggested the researcher must take on what he terms a *phenomenological attitude* becoming more aware of what the participant might be experiencing and suggesting the researcher should take time to consider *the experience* (Husserl, 1931/2012).

Husserl adopted Franz Brentano's explanation of *intentionality* to understand and classify each nuance noting all expression relates to something (Moran, 2000). Husserl believed all thoughts and perceptions have some type of meaning (Dowling, 2007). For Husserl, phenomenology was a way to study *things* as they *appeared* (Lindseth &

Norberg, 2004). *Intentionality*, he suggested, was the technique to reach the critical understanding of human perception and experience (Dowling, 2007, p. 132). For Husserl phenomenology as science becomes a source of knowledge and a way to uncover the meaning (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). What is relevant in Husserl's work for interpretative phenomenological analysis is finding the *essence of the experience* (Smith et al., 2009).

Heidegger (1962), a student of Husserl, indicated without an interpretative approach, getting at the essence of human experience was not possible (Smith, 2007). Heidegger (1953/1996) stressed that humans are in the world with experiences and history. He saw the subjective worlds of humans as *being-in-the-world* which is different from the objective world (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). Heidegger identified the word "Dasein" which means *being there or there being* (Smith et al., 2009, p. 16), rather than Husserl's idea of consciousness, arguing that we access meaning when we stop and reflect on what we have done. Heidegger also argued interpretation will always be situated making sense of each individual experience at a particular time (Smith, 2011). According to Smith et al. (2009), for interpretative phenomenological analysis, "humans are thrown into a world of objects, language, and relationships and that being-in-the-world will always be perspectival, temporal, in-relation-to something" (p. 18). Larkin et al. (2006) added by focusing on this interpretative stance, the "third-person view of a first-person account" (p. 110) is acknowledged while the researcher uses reflexivity to learn and appreciate the individual's *situated experience* (Smith, 2011).

Merleau-Ponty (1964) also shared the understanding of *being-in-the-world*. For Merleau-Ponty (1964), the body is a means of communicating. Although "we can never share entirely in the other's experience," (Smith et al., 2009, p. 19) we can observe and listen to get a better understanding of these experiences. Being perceptive and understanding of how language is being used is essential to understanding embodied experiences (Wilde, 2003). The embodiment as a philosophical perspective views humans as embodied rather than humans having bodies (Wilde, 2003). The embodiment is a *state of being*; people come to know their worlds through their bodies.

For example, when a person is afflicted with kidney failure, there are physical changes to the body beyond the individual's control even though the individual is still in control of how he/she responds to these changes (Wilde, 2003). The *life-world* (*lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived human relations*) that Merleau-Ponty identifies influences "how the individual makes sense of his/her embodied experience" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 19). What is essential to an interpretative phenomenological analysis study is how the person makes sense of adjusting to body changes thus understanding the disturbance in feeling in harmony with one's body (Wilde, 2003).

Sartre (1956) emphasized people create themselves; each defines him/her self (Menkiti, 1984). He stressed people are always developing; "we are always becoming ourselves, and that the self is not a pre-existing entity to be discovered, but rather an ongoing project to be unfurled" (Smith et al., 2009 p. 19). According to Sartre (1956), the individual's activities reflect his/her behavior. Sartre also indicates everything we see is interpreted by us and what we are aware of is not isolated from the real world (Williams & Kirkpatrick, 1960). What is relevant for interpretative phenomenological analysis is each individual has the ability to *become* regardless of the physical body limitations he/she has and find meaning in life (Pettit, 2012).

These theorists influenced my interpretative phenomenological analysis study in the following ways: Husserl's focus to pay attention to the lived experience of individuals (Smith et al., 2009); Heidegger's (1962) view of *being-in-the-world* and how *being-in-the-world* will always be with an individual perspective, and that this point of view is always situated; Merleau-Ponty's perspective on embodiment and "how people will know the world through their bodies" (Wilde, 2003, p. 170); and Sartre's view that people have the ability to make choices and go beyond the limitations of their physical bodies to create themselves (Pettit, 2012).

3.4.2 Hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation (Linge, 2008). Theorists who study interpretation attempt to uncover meaning, intentions, and understand the "relationships

between the context of the text and the context of text's interpretation" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 22). Interpretative methods draw from philosophy to focus on making meaning (Smith, 2004). Smith et al. (2009) suggests interpretative phenomenological analysis involves the participant attempting to *make sense* of their experience while the researcher is *making sense* of what the participant is *making sense* of.

Interpretation within an interpretative phenomenological analysis study takes on the hermeneutic circle, which is the relationship between the parts (object of interpretation) and the whole (interpreter) (Smith, 2000, p. 5). From a hermeneutic process, Heidegger would not agree to any knowledge other than an interpretative stance (Smith et al., 2009) and suggested reflexivity as a method to *make sense* of the interpretation process. Two other theorists who play a role in interpretative phenomenological analysis hermeneutics are Schleiermacher and Gadamer (Smith et al., 2009).

For Schleiermacher (1998), interpretation is a skillful procedure that requires insight. According to Torrance (1968), Schleiermacher saw interpretation as an avenue to understanding text, and this text was the creation of the mind. Schleiermacher saw interpretation as entering the mind of the writer through empathy when viewing what was written (Dilthey & Jameson, 1972). Schleiermacher suggested the written material of the interpretation reflects the grammatical perspective while the psychological perspective exposes how the researcher translated meaning (Pettit, 2012), and it is with these techniques that the researcher creates a unique perspective (Smith et al., 2009) of what was. The analysis of the interpretation produces something personal offering insight from a specific viewpoint thereby not always reflecting the original conversation, yet from Schleiermacher's perspective; it may provide understanding which may not be understood by the participant (Smith et al., 2009).

Gadamer suggests that in doing research, the researcher understands more about themselves as a researcher (Bradshaw, 2013) and interprets what has been heard from the participants. Linge (2008) indicates the researcher in *making-sense* works through comparing and contrasting data, and this can modify the findings.

Gadamer (1975/1989) reported that to understand the part, one must view the whole. This process he refers to as the hermeneutic circle. "Moving back and forth between the parts to understand the whole of the analysis means reading words and then sentences to understand the whole story" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 81). Smith et al. (2009) indicates the researcher is making sense of the participant making sense. Linge (2008) suggests Gadamer's relevance to interpretative phenomenological analysis is through language and writing; they are the enabling forces to understanding. As well, Smith et al. (2009) identified "our analyses might offer meaningful insights which exceed and subsume the explicit claims of our participants" (p. 23).

Adopting Schleiermacher's perspective (Smith et al., 2009), I was conscious that there might be a difference in interpreting what the participant meant and what I, the researcher, expressed. Heidegger's implementation of reflexivity (Larkin et al., 2006) was an important process in my *making-sense* while Gadamer's hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 1975/1989; Linge, 2008) provided a technique to reflect on my thinking. The process assisted me in understanding more about my situation and how what I thought and did might impact my study. As I engaged with the text, interpreted what I read, and understood, I presented an interpretation of the phenomenon I sought to understand.

3.4.3 Idiography.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is concerned with the *particular*, and this idiographic perspective will contrast with most scientific research methods that are *nomothetic* in that they make general claims about a group or population (Barlow & Nock, 2009).

Generality does not take into account the individual's perspective. Interpretative phenomenological analysis is committed to understanding the *detail*; it suggests there is a depth to each analysis, through understanding the particular group and the situated context of the group as it relates to the phenomena being studied (Smith et al., 2009). For example, in my study, I was concerned about the lived experience of how each participant *made sense* of his/her college experience and the uniqueness found in

his/her perspective (Smith, 2010). To understand this particular, I had to examine each participant's experience. Giddens (1991) indicates each identity changes with new growth and when development takes place. Interpreting how an individual perceives a specific incident could have multiple meanings (Smith, 2004). For example, students within the same classroom activity may have multiple interpretations of the same experience, and each individual may perceive the same activity differently. The individual in an interpretative phenomenological analysis study is viewed as an agent, and learning about each individual is critical (Smith, 2004).

According to Sen (1999), agents are individuals who are making decisions rather than remaining passive. Personal agency as described by (Bandura, 1990) suggests individuals influence their *life path* by what they select and create. According to Smith et al. (2009):

IPA's commitment to the particular operates on two levels. Firstly there is a commitment to the particular, in the sense of details, and therefore the depth analysis. As a consequence, the analysis must be thorough and systematic.

Secondly, IPA is committed to understanding how the particular experiential phenomena have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context. (p. 29)

Accordingly, Larkin, Watts & Clifton (2006) suggest that within an interpretative phenomenological analysis study once the analysis for each case is complete, all data is examined to discover where there are shared experiences of patterns of meaning and reflections. Hermans (1988, p. 793) implies the *particular* in humans often shares a likeness, and yet sometimes there is no likeness. He proposes understanding the particular provides a useful way to study personal meaning. The value of idiography according to Smith et al. (2009) is the interpretative phenomenological analysis as the individual brings uniqueness to the phenomenon being studied.

I used idiography as a technique to understand the unique perspective of each participant's lived experience. I was committed to focusing on the detail of each participant and carefully created individual analysis sheets to better understand each perspective.

3.5 Justification of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as a Methodology and Appreciative Inquiry as the Theoretical Framework

I was interested in the lived experiences of the participants and how these experiences impact the individual's learning. Furthermore, I was interested in the positive experiences of participants. Prairie Site College has many years of negative data accumulated from the surveys introduced in chapter one. Implementing appreciative inquiry allowed me to focus on the positive and understand more about the rural college students' lived experiences. As I set out to discover what methodology best suited my research, I found interpretative phenomenological analysis allowed me to focus on the students' lived experiences. This emphasis on the particular also highlighted how the participants perceived their experience. As I began designing my research, I saw photo-elicitation and semi-structured interviews as techniques that would highlight the participants' lived experiences, and interpretative phenomenological analysis allowed for the use of both procedures. As I realized the destiny of this study, it was the interpretative phenomenological analysis techniques that enabled me to highlight the findings. Had I chosen a different question related to this phenomenon, my research approach may have been different. I adapted a table by Smith et al. (2009) to explain how asking questions in a variety of ways changes the research approach and perhaps the theoretical framework.

Within this section, I discuss alternative approaches and identify the reasons why I chose not to implement them and favoured interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Research Approach	The Research Question	Key Features
Descriptive phenomenology	What are the main features of being engaged?	Focus on the common structure of being engaged as an experience.
Interpretative phenomenological analysis	How do students, who have engaged in learning opportunities at Prairie Site College, make sense	Focus on personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context, for people who share a particular

Research Approach	The Research Question	Key Features
	of being engaged?	experience.
Narrative	What sorts of story structures do students use to describe the activities that engage them?	Focus on how narrative relates to sense-making of being engaged.
Grounded theory	What factors influence how students respond to being engaged?	Develop explanatory level accounts that identify the factors, impacts, and influences.
Discursive psychology	How do students talk about being engaged in learning experiences?	Focus on interaction over and above content, and caution about inferring anything about being engaged.

Table 3.1 *Different qualitative approaches, different questions (adapted from Smith et al., 2009, p. 45)*

In descriptive phenomenology, the participant's viewpoint is the focal point whereas in the interpretative phenomenological analysis method, the researcher's interpretative perspective is important. Within the interpretative phenomenological analysis framework, there is not a search for the *essence*; the emphasis is on the researcher's interpretative engagement with the data (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Husserl as the founder of descriptive phenomenology emphasized the importance of consciousness (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). A tenet of this Husserlian approach is transcendental subjectivity. This is a condition of consciousness wherein "the researcher must shed all prior personal knowledge to grasp the essential lived experiences of those being studied" (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 727). Shedding prior personal knowledge or *transcendental subjectivity* can be accomplished by using a process called bracketing (Flood, 2010). In Husserl's world, humans are not critically reflective of their experiences, and motivation is influenced by what humans perceive as real. Therefore, it is important to remove perceptions and feelings to get at the essence. Counter to this claim are my views that in this world we are attached to our feelings and issues that make up our life, and attempting to transcend them is not possible. I am who I am because of the things I experience in life. Therefore I rejected descriptive phenomenology use on these grounds.

Heidegger suggests that humans are influenced by the world they lived in (Flood, 2010). With this belief, it is not human subjectivity that is the focus of an interpretative phenomenological analysis. Instead, it is what the individual's story implies about the experience (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

According to Smith et al. (2009), interpretative phenomenological analysis does not implement a specific version of phenomenology although it strongly emphasizes the interpretative. Husserl's descriptive phenomenology, on the other hand, assumes there are commonalities within lived experiences of participants; there are "*essences or eidetic structures* which are common to all persons who have a lived experience--there is one correct interpretation of experiences" (Flood, 2010, p. 9).

The aim of an interpretative phenomenological analysis study is to listen to each participant's experience and attempt to make sense of these experiences through a reflexive process. In interpretative phenomenological analysis, the researcher is part of the process and through reflexivity has noted the assumptions that might influence the analysis (Crist & Tanner, 2003). According to Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2006), the researcher in interpretation will be influenced by his/her bias while Husserlian researchers attempt to neutralize all their preconceptions (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Such an approach is contrary to my beliefs as a researcher. I was very much a part of this research study. Therefore, I did not choose descriptive phenomenology.

I considered a narrative approach because of its design to collect and tell stories about the participants' lives. Although interpretative phenomenological analysis is close to the narrative approach (Laver & Croxon, 2015), I viewed the narrative approach as the researcher was interested in individuals' stories with the intent to understand the relationships or structures of each account. Narrative stories often explore a problem about a single person with the goal to understand the experience of an individual (Creswell, 2008). I was interested in talking to many individuals to figure out about their college experience although I also wanted to understand the group perspective. According to Smith et al. (2009), meaning within the narrative approach is uncovered in how the storyteller selects and orders the story. I was interested in listening to the

participants' stories and learning what *being engaged* meant to them rather than analyzing what types of stories the participants told. I wanted to understand each student's lived experiences and then find the similarities and differences among the group participants. According to Gardner (2011), interpretative phenomenological analysis has similarities to the narrative approach. Nevertheless, I chose interpretative phenomenological analysis over the narrative for its opportunity to view a group of individuals and make sense of their stories.

I considered grounded theory initially because of its interpretation option. According to Gray (2014), grounded theory generates theory through a systematic approach in design and data analysis. While interpretative phenomenological analysis presents guidelines for the analysis, it is not concerned with generating theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). According to Creswell (2008), the researcher uses prior knowledge in grounded theory to help develop a theory about a particular phenomenon. In grounded theory, the literature review provides a post-analysis, so prior knowledge does not influence the study (Gardner, 2011). Furthermore, Wimpenny and Gass (2000) contend researchers of grounded theory are interested in any relevant emerging data. Contrary to this, interpretative phenomenological analysis is concerned with the particular which, for this study, are the lived experiences of students. Interpretative phenomenological analysis also assumes prior knowledge will influence the researcher. As well, the researcher's interpretations may be informed by theory (Larkin et al., 2006). According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), researchers implementing grounded theory look for the items that transcend all groups. As well, the grounded theory does not apply an idiographic focus (Pettit, 2012). I was interested in understanding more about particular students' lived experiences. I chose not to use grounded theory because I was not looking at generating theory.

Discursive psychology (DP) "treats mind, experience, emotion, and intention" while examining the participant's interactions (Potter & Wiggins, 2007, p. 79). This approach sees reality as *becoming* as each individual interprets his/her situated experience (Potter, 2003). Although interpretative phenomenological analysis examines

the detailed account of the individual's involvement, the emphasis is not on the language function in specific context. As well, Potter (2003) highlights that discursive psychology does not provide a set of procedures to follow.

I chose interpretative phenomenological analysis over discursive psychology because I was more interested in understanding the personal meaning and making sense of what I heard. As I thought about each qualitative approach, I found interpretative phenomenological analysis the best method to make sense of what my participants were making sense of.

3.6 Researching My Students/The Insider Researcher

Researching my place of work was an important part of this study. I wanted to understand the students within my institution from an academic perspective and as a key leader within the institution. As such, taking on this task meant being aware of my bias and dealing with any power differentials, confidentiality, and ethical issues.

Throughout this paper, the pronoun "I" was used to highlight my part in the research process. The use of I aligns with interpretative phenomenological analysis as the method I chose to gain insight into data (Smith, 2004, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2006) highlight the importance of acknowledging the part of the researcher within the process. These concepts fit nicely within the perceptions of what I wanted when researching within my place of work. The pronoun I emphasized how I was co-constructing meanings as I pursued connections with participants and data.

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) indicated qualitative research presents a particular perspective. As a novice insider researcher, I was acutely aware that my view was biased. I was sensitive and reflexive in gathering data, conducting interviews, transcribing recordings, writing up my analysis, and making conclusions. I was passionate about my place of work, and that passion needed to be set aside, so I could listen with an open mind to view the institution from another's perspective. To do this, I kept reflexive notes as suggested by Boud (2001).

I found it useful to think about what I heard from the participants, reflect on what I thought I heard, and identify any thoughts that came to me at the time and ponder over each item. While the notes provided some inner reflection, I also found it helpful to discuss my thoughts with other individuals. Therefore I sought out critical friends (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009) who assisted me in discovering and understanding more about my hidden bias and such. Questioning my thoughts, I took the time to reflect on why I thought the way I did.

Undertaking research and gaining the trust of participants is a serious undertaking. I made every effort to create a research structure which indicated trustworthiness (Koch, 1996). Researching within my place of employment meant ensuring my ethical practices were outlined and followed. All institutional policies, research regulations (i.e., University of Liverpool and Prairie Site College), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) guidelines were adhered to.

3.7 Summary

I chose an interpretative approach to develop my research as I believed there were multiple realities of what was observed, heard, seen, and felt. As an insider researcher, appreciative inquiry provided a strength-based perspective which focused on the positive and provided the theoretical framework to highlight interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis highlights the lived experiences which best suited my research question. My primary research question was “How do students, who have engaged with learning opportunities at Prairie Site College, make sense of being involved in these experiences?”

According to Smith et al. (2009), this type of question is focused on the particular and the search for personal meaning and *sense-making*. Interpretative phenomenological analysis draws from three theoretical underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography.

Husserl's phenomenological focus suggested *to get back to the thing itself* (Dowling, 2007), and this perspective provided me with a useful way to focus on the participants' positive college experiences. I rejected Husserl's idea of neutralizing all preconceptions (Lopez & Willis, 2004) and chose to implement Heidegger's approach which concentrated on *the matter of interpretation* (Larkin et al., 2006). I found this method resonated with my belief that each individual always has a situated perspective. I was mindful that my prior experiences were subjective, and this could influence the interpretations that I made. Merleau-Ponty's (1964) contribution of the *embodiment* was also useful as I listened to each participant and took into account how each experience was different. As a researcher, it was important to understand each participant's *embodied existence* (Wilde, 2003) and how this assisted them in understanding their worlds. Sartre's perspective also contributed to my study in how I was able to understand the participants' ability to see beyond the meaning of their experience and realize how they were interpreting their development.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis takes on a hermeneutic approach to understanding each participant's lived experience for the purpose to make sense of "what it means" for the participant (Larkin et al., 2006, p 104). Other theorists that have influenced my thinking regarding interpreting the participants' lived experiences were Schleiermacher and Gadamer. As I engaged with my text, I did find clarity in what the participants were attempting to express (Torrance, 1968). I also found Gadamer's hermeneutic circle (Linge, 2008) a useful method to examine the text to understand each participant's story better. The hermeneutic circle was an important process that assisted me in reviewing the parts as well as the whole story and in thinking about how my reflections impacts the interpretation.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis acknowledges the importance of focusing on the particular (idiographic). As I concentrated on the participants' positive lived experiences, I was able to get a better understanding of what Prairie Site College could provide more of to enhance positive student experiences. As I implemented

idiography within my study, I was conscious of the importance of each person's perspective through examining each individual as a particular agent.

Within the next chapter, there is a discussion on the research procedures.

Chapter 4

Procedures

In the previous chapter, I explained the methodology adopted to answer my research question and discussed the reasons for choosing the qualitative approach of interpretative phenomenological analysis. Chapter 4 explains how I implemented an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach at Prairie Site College. It begins with an introduction of the participants and continues with a description of the data collection process. This leads into an explanation of how the research participants were selected followed by an explanation of how data was analyzed and reflection on the processes undertaken. The chapter concludes by presenting the ethical issues considered when designing this interpretative phenomenological analysis research project.

4.1 Selection of Participants

Smith (2007) argues that for an interpretative phenomenological analysis study, the number of participants is not as important as the quality of the accounts. The term participant is used rather than sample size to demonstrate that my study is not about finding generalities for the greater population. Instead, it is about understanding the particular. Although my findings are not generalizable, they could be helpful to other community college personnel who are interested in supporting student engagement.

I chose to recruit a group of students from five of the six different schools at the institution. The sixth school offered short courses in emergency training and did not follow the same academic year as the other five schools; therefore, no students were recruited. Participants were recruited using purposive and snowballing techniques. Purposive recruitment was implemented to seek out only a few participants (Tongco, 2007) that were graduating from Prairie Site College. I assumed that students who were in their first year of study might not have had the opportunity to experience club activities. Although this perspective might be of interest in another study, I was intentionally seeking the student who had time to experience student life at Prairie Site

College. Snowballing (Browne, 2005) was implemented to access specific populations from the participants' social networks. According to Noy (2008), implementing the technique of snowballing provides a way to gain further access to people who are experiencing similar situations. I implemented the technique of snowballing to ensure there were participants from the schools of agriculture, human services, and energy.

The sixth school operates as a cost recovery model within a different academic year. I did not intend to interview any of these students at this time. However, with the increased number of international students on campus, I wanted to ensure their perspectives were heard, and the snowballing technique provided an avenue to access these participants. My selection process was not a random selection process, and I was acutely aware that these types of recruitment techniques were biased.

Although this might be considered a limitation, I felt that second-year or the graduating students were able to provide more in-depth knowledge than first-year students. First-year students could still be learning their way around campus and might lack the experience of dorm life, club experiences, and educational activities. Participants represented the five schools and were graduates from diploma, applied, and degree programs. In a diploma program, students graduated after completing two full years of study. Students within an applied degree program graduated after completing four years in the program (3 years of classroom activities and the 4th year working in the field). Degree students graduated after completing four full years of academic work.

To gain access to second-year students meant my visiting the Students' Association (SA) Office. I met with the Students' Association president who invited me to attend a meeting and speak to their Board. I also presented my research study on two separate occasions at campus association dinners. Many of the students knew me as the president of the college, so I deliberately made a distinction between myself as the president and myself as a student researcher. Speaking as a student attending the University of Liverpool, I identified my research project and then explained that I was

seeking individuals who would be interested in participating in my research study. I also attended two classrooms to present my research proposal and request volunteers.

The table below provides an overview of each participant. There was a ratio of 60% females to 40% males. Prairie Site College has two campuses, and I wanted five participants from each campus.

As indicated in Table 4.1 the second column identified as status refers to the year each participant graduated. Second-year participants will graduate with a diploma. The fourth-year participant will graduate from an applied degree. The fifth-year participant in this study attended three years of upgrading and a two-year diploma. The column heading noted as participation in a college group refers to students who were actively involved in a college activity.

Gender	Status	Academic Division	Participation in a college group	Campus	Pseudonym
M	2nd year	Agricultural Sciences	Student-Managed Farm	A	Mark
F	2nd year	Agricultural Sciences	Agriculture Tour Club	A	Jade
F	5th year (includes academic upgrading)	Energy Sciences	Hired to look after boilers	B	Holly
M	4th year	Business *General Business major	International Club and Students' Association	B	Jack
F	4th year	Business *Commerce major	Students' Association	B	Miko
F	2nd year	Business *Appraisal and Assessment major	Sports and Business Clubs	B	Larry
F	2nd year	Arts Science	Fashion Club	B	Andi
M	4th year	Environmental Sciences	Board of Governors Rep	A	Taylor
F	2nd year	Humanities	Ranch and Cow Horse	A	Alex
M	2nd year	Agricultural Sciences/ Environmental Sciences	Sports	A	Tom

Table 4.1 *Participants' information*

Smith (2004) argues that interpretative phenomenological analysis research sample sizes can vary. From an educational perspective, an interpretative phenomenological analysis study seeks individuals who share a particular experience, and it is the in-depth analysis of the situated context that assists the researcher in understanding more about the phenomena. Nevertheless, for professional doctorates, 4 to 10 participants were recommended (Smith et al., 2009). To ensure I had data from the different schools and students from both campuses, I chose to interview 10 participants—five from each campus.

4.2 Data Collection

I reviewed the value of face-to-face interviews before undertaking a data collection process that involved the use of photographs and interviews. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), the interview provides oral history with the intent to gain a new understanding of an individual's past. Creswell (2008) states the interview process provides an opportunity to obtain rich data. Gray (2014) corroborates these ideas explaining that there are some situations in which the interview is the most logical research technique. For example, if the focus of the research is to understand feelings, the face-to-face interview allows for opportunities to clarify by asking questions of the participant.

Koch (1998) indicated the researcher should have good listening skills to ensure the participants can be heard.

According to Kvale (2006), the researcher and the participant, through discussion, create new knowledge. Turner (2010) found that the type of interview depends on the purpose of the research. Rabionet (2011) notes that the strength of the semi-structured interview lies in how questions are asked as well as the way probing is used to create further questions. Moreover, Cousin (2009) contends that semi-structured interviews provide an avenue to construct meaning.

I am aware that using the semi-structured interview could have some shortcomings. The most prominent one is that a semi-structured interview is an artificial

situation which often involves talking to a complete stranger. The second possible shortcoming could be the researcher does not engage in good listening skills. The researcher must be attentive to the participant when conducting a face-to-face interview, and good listening skills are an important aspect in interviewing. The third shortcoming might include the researcher not being attentive to the subject's non-verbal body language. These nonverbal cues may provide information that is helpful to the researcher. Interviews allow for collecting data, and I believe that even with the shortcomings identified, the semi-structured interview offered me the best way to gather data.

I wanted to find a way to put the participants at ease and create opportunities for conversations. Therefore, I implemented a pre-interview activity using photography through a technique known as photo-elicitation.

4.2.1 Photo-elicitation.

Guell and Ogilvie (2015) argue that photo-elicitation is a participant-task method which allows each participant to produce photographs to “provide data for their right” (p. 203). I would also suggest that photo-elicitation is a developmental activity which empowers participants to create their vision of what they have experienced. Using photographs as part of the interview process is not a new concept. Photo-elicitation dates back to the 1950s.

John Collier (1957) proposed using photographs in the interview is a useful technique to help individuals recall memory (Harper, 2002). The emphasis of photo-elicitation is on the participants providing their data. According to Oliffe and Bottorff (2007) creating photographs is an empowering activity, and the participants have the opportunity to construct knowledge from their experiences.

Photo-elicitation is implemented in a range of studies such as patients' experiences with chemotherapy (Frith & Harcourt, 2007), commuters' journeys to work (Guell & Ogilvie, 2015), and identifying aspects of schooling that are relevant to autistic youth (Hill, 2014). Dandy and Van Der Wal (2011) emphasized that the process of

photo-elicitation supports the participant in building on his/her memory. Using the participant's photographs will extend the conversation, and questions help the participant to explore more about the experience. For example, when participants describe a situation which is not understood, the researcher can ask questions about the photograph to clarify meaning. Moreover, Evans-Agnew and Rosemberg (2016) argue when participants view their photographs, they are making sense of their experiences. An example of this is in a study by Samuels (2004) who explored the experiences of boy monks. When the young boys took pictures of their ideas of an elder brother, the explanation was rich with description. This point was illustrated by Harper (2002):

I believe photo-elicitation mines deeper shafts into different parts of the human consciousness than do word-alone interviews. It is due partly to how remembering is enlarged by photographs and partly due to the particular quality of the photograph itself. Photographs appear to capture the impossible; a person gone, an event past. That extraordinary sense of seeming to retrieve something that has disappeared belongs alone to the photograph, and it leads to deep and interesting talk. (p. 24)

The previous arguments for using photo-elicitation were appealing, and I felt this technique could assist me in a "measure of closeness" (Cousin, 2009, p. 8) to the experience of my participants.

However, before embarking on the approach, I decided to undertake a test interview. My reason for implementing a test interview was to try out my anticipated process. From this test interview I learned the dictation software only captured part of the conversation, and the photographs needed to be numbered to keep track of the discussion. The full details of this process are in Appendix C.

4.2.2 The use of photo-elicitation.

A week before each interview the social conventions of taking pictures were discussed with each participant in a scheduled pre-meeting. See Appendix A for more information. Participants responded positively to the photo-elicitation method and produced a range of photographs that were factual and naturalistic. The total number of

photographs for each participant ranged from 6 to 15. The photographs provided a trigger for the participants to expand on their stories.

Participants took snapshots which represented their realities and included images of their engagement with their learning. Other images included pictures of animals and people connecting in learning and social settings. Photographs were created by participants using their choices and taken from their viewpoint.

Photographs provided an opportunity for participants to focus on areas that represented positive feelings associated with their college experience.

The following images generated conversations regarding participants' lived experiences on campus. I subsequently analyzed these conversations to understand more about how the participants viewed their experiences.



Figure 4.1 Andi's photograph of her home away from home



Figure 4.2 Taylor's photograph of a new learning experience

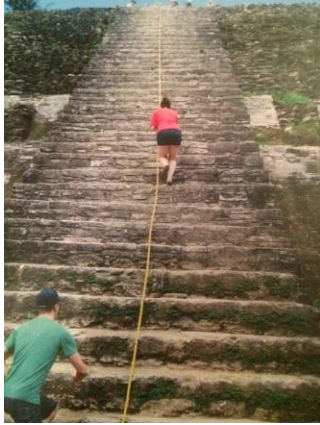


Figure 4.3 Jade's photograph relating to her academic journey

4.2.3 Preparing for the interview.

According to Kajornboon (2005), interviews create a systematic way of talking. I implemented the following steps mirroring Kajornboon's approach. Step one was to identify the topic and create questions related to my research. My question was: "How do students, who have engaged with learning opportunities at Prairie Site College, make sense of being engaged in these experiences?" I was focused on personal meaning and *making-sense* of the participants' stories. The list of relevant sub-questions supports the primary research question. See Appendix H for further detail. The instructions for the researcher provided interviewing prompts for me and all participants received the same prompts. It should be noted that before interviewing the participants, an interview protocol was created. Appendix E provides the details.

Instructions for the researcher

(Refreshments are set out on the table ahead of time.)

Researcher to participant: Thank you for taking time to meet with me. I have provided some refreshments. Please help yourself.

1. Go over the participant information sheet (PIS) and consent form. Have each participant sign the consent.
2. Go over the recording method with each participant. Let each participant know they can stop the recorder at any time.
3. Start the recording on my iPhone.

First question: Why did you choose Prairie Site College?

Next questions:

What thoughts come to you when you think about your experience and view this photo? Expand.

How long did it take you to settle in as a student? Expand.

When you think about the experiences you have described, what was the significance of being in this program? How did that feel? Can you expand?

What motivates you to learn?

Can you expand on why this is significant to you?

Is there any more information you want to add?

Figure 4.4 Instructions for the researcher

The final step in this approach was thinking about the photo-elicitation process. After my test interview, the photographs were presented differently; Appendix C identifies the details.

Ethical issues should be considered when conducting semi-structured interviews. I needed to ensure confidentiality and ensure the participants understood the social conventions of taking pictures (detailed in Appendix A). I also needed to be aware of any possible power dynamics with my position at the college and identify any conceivable risks when doing this type of research.

The purpose of the research was provided to each participant through the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) (Appendix A), and the consent form (Appendix B) was signed by each participant.

Understanding the pros and cons of interviewing, to put the participants at ease and create opportunities for conversation, I implemented a pre-interview activity involving the use of photography. Wanting to feel comfortable with my interviewing

skills, I created a test interview. Appendix E presents a discussion of the process which was tested with a volunteer (non-participant) before interviewing the participants.

4.2.4 The interview.

Rabionet (2011) argued that the interview protocol “has two important components”: introducing yourself and identifying the questions that will be asked to each participant (p. 564). The introduction process sets the tone for the interview. I wanted to create a positive atmosphere and develop an environment that encouraged honest reflections from each participant. Therefore, I tried to ensure each participant felt comfortable before I started asking questions.

Before interviewing, I scheduled a pre-meeting with each participant. This meeting included personal introductions and a discussion regarding the purpose of the research project. Extra time was taken to describe and discuss the photo-elicitation process to ensure that participants understood the social conventions of using the camera.

The importance of respecting individuals’ privacy when taking photographs was discussed with each participant. Participants signed the consent form which also stated that I had the right to use anonymous photos (Appendix B).

Following the pre-meetings, participants emailed me their photographs. This process took approximately three weeks. Once the photographs were received, an interview timetable was created to ensure that only one interview was scheduled per day. I wanted to ensure that I had time to complete the field notes, listen to the recorded interview, and transcribe the recording immediately after the interview. To ensure interview dates were not missed, a follow-up technique was used. This technique meant emailing each student the day before the interview. Only one participant needed a second reminder to ensure that the interview period was acceptable. All other participants responded to the first follow-up email.

At the interview, each participant was thanked for their participation in the study and offered some refreshments. The opening question to all participants was why they

chose Prairie Site College. This initial question appeared to set participants at ease. I noticed a change in each participant as they spoke. They seemed to relax as they conveyed their reasons for choosing the institution. Each interview was in a familiar space. For example, one meeting room was where the Students' Association met while the other area was where the student directors held meetings. Locations were chosen for their quietness in an attempt to create an atmosphere of comfort and ease. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Thank you notes were sent to each participant once the interviews were complete.

4.3 Data Analysis

I followed Smith et al. (2009) guidelines to ensure my analysis process was systematic. Figure 4.5 illustrates the process implemented for analyzing participants' data.

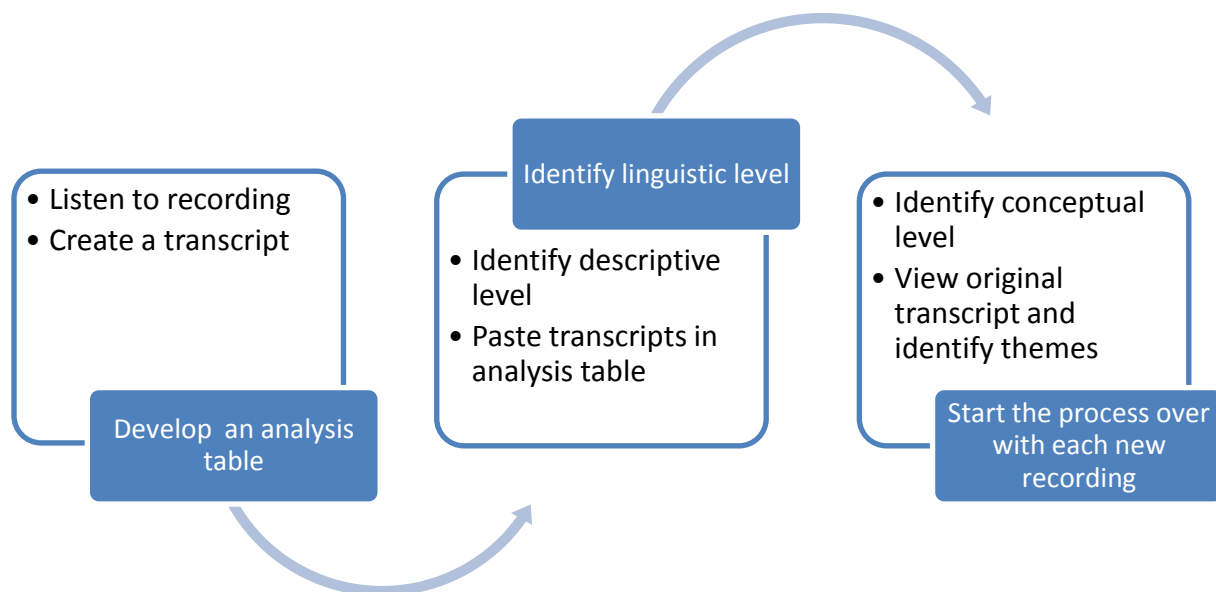


Figure 4.5 Listening to recorded interviews, developing transcripts and analysis tables.

The analysis table consisted of three levels of annotation as noted in Figure 4.5.

Table 4.2 provides a sample of the analysis table that was created for each participant.

Themes	Sample Transcript (without interviewer comments) Pseudonym Mark April 10, 2015		Exploratory Comments
Prairie Site College is a welcoming place	1	Well, I chose Prairie Site College yeah. I was	Mark was looking for a college in the States or Canada; he realized he needed more education regarding purebred cattle and the particulars of agriculture, the career he wants.
	2	looking at getting some further education and	
	3	Always wanted to travel. I am really passionate	
People go the extra mile to help students	4	with rodeo	Our rodeo coordinator at the time (X) was the one who helped him get here, and the faculty was able to help him get settled in by loaning him some housing materials.
	5	so I looked into going to the States then	
Making it easy to fit in	6	came to Canada because the States did not have	
	7	the course I want to take, so I applied at	<i>Prairie Site College's accepting manner</i> <i>Prairie Site College's accommodations</i> <i>Caring people</i>
Prairie Site College offers a bull riding school	8	XX and XXX he used to be the rodeo coach here	
	9	he got to me pretty quick and yeah I got talkin' to	
Bringing in the best pros possible	10	him and it sounded really good, so I got on a plane and came over.	Mark is amazed at how the Prairie Site College people welcomed him and gave him household items to make his stay better.
	11	yep	
Learning from the best	12	yeah this picture is from ah.. the bullfighting	
	13	School last year...um I was really lucky	
	14	that...um...the college actually paid for me to	
	15	go...um...I've been fighting bulls for a while yeah	
	16	it was really good opportunity to show my skills in	
	17	front of some Pro Rodeo guys that were teaching	
	18	it and...um I then was lucky enough to get a few	
	19	jobs...I'm gonna fight bulls at some Pro Rodeos this	
	20	year. So that it would get really well...um. It's	
	21	actually pretty funny...laugh..	


Themes	Sample Transcript (without interviewer comments) Pseudonym Mark April 10, 2015		Exploratory Comments
	22	.. the next bull after this one. I got hooked pretty bad up in the air.	<p>Mark was fighting a bucking bull. He is most grateful the college is paying his way to fight bulls. Mark helps out every weekend with the rodeo practices. He has gotten quite good. It only took him two years to become a Pro.</p>  <p><i>A learning experience</i> <i>Practice time in the arena</i> <i>Learning from the best</i></p>
	23	And I broke my collar bone and laughed...my	
	24	rotator cuff	
	25	that...but yeah no.	
	26	It...um...yeah...it was a good	
	27	experience...definitely...like... the college offered.	
		You know a really good bull riding school and I was lucky to participate in it.	
Legend for Table 4.2			
The numbering in the Sample Transcript column represents the transcript line numbering			
<u>Exploratory Comments:</u>			
Descriptive level is in plain text			
<i>Linguistic level is in italics</i>			
Conceptual level is in bold			

Table 4.2 Analysis table (Adopted from Smith et al., 2009, p. 93)

4.4 Describing the Process

Smith et al. (2009) was my main reference for understanding and using interpretative phenomenological analysis. As a novice researcher-practitioner, I relied extensively on this reference source to ensure I implemented a trustworthy research procedure. I acknowledge that relying on a single source is dependent on the quality of the reference. Smith et al., (2009) is widely cited in other interpretative phenomenological analyses and provides clarity on extremely beneficial techniques. Following this reference's suggested guidelines to sort out themes, I relied on their examples to move through each technique (abstraction, subsumption, and numeration).

The source provided a cohesive approach to understanding validity, provided commentary on interpretative phenomenological analysis in relation to other approaches, and illustrated details in collecting data and writing up an interpretative phenomenological analysis. I am aware that relying on a single source to implement this research has its limitations. I referred to other sources (Wagstaff et al., 2014; Chamberlain, 2011; Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Giorgi, 1997) to note some restrictions. Chapter seven also identifies possible limitations with interpretative phenomenological analysis. Nevertheless, I feel that I have a balanced understanding of interpretative phenomenological analysis research and am not naive to think there is only one perspective when undertaking an interpretative phenomenological analysis.

The first task in my analysis process was to create transcripts from each recorded interview. Participants' recordings were manually transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were sent to the respective participant for verification. According to Smith et al. (2009), an interpretative phenomenological analysis study intends to "analyze each transcript, case-by-case, through a systematic, qualitative analysis" (p. 4). The process implemented was identified in Table 4.2. To do this, I focused on each participant, identifying my recollections of the interview, and re-read the transcripts to understand what the participant expressed in an attempt to enter the participant's world.

The next task was to make notes of anything that was of interest in the transcript. I tried to become familiar with each transcript and what was being expressed; I made

comments about what I thought, yet I tried to accurately represent what the participant expressed. I also commented on three levels of annotation within each participant's analysis table. The levels of annotation were descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. I noted descriptive comments on the analysis table, identified keywords and phrases, and explanations the participant used. I noted linguistic comments with the focus of exploring how the participant used language. I paid "attention to their use of pronouns, pauses, laughter" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 101) and hesitations.

My conceptual comments focused on understanding what mattered to the participants. To complete the three levels of annotation, I read a small section of the transcript and then applied each level of annotation. It was helpful to re-read each participant's words sentence by sentence to get a feel for what was being expressed. This process of "de-contextualization" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 90) assisted me in critically viewing each participant's story and searching for what might be embedded within the words expressed.

4.5 Developing Themes

Smith et al. (2009) identified

"the task of developing emergent themes is to reduce the volume of detail in the transcript, and initial noting whilst maintaining complexity in terms of mapping the interrelationships, connections, and patterns between exploratory noting" (p. 91).

Themes were written down that pertained to the original transcript as each participant's analysis table was reviewed. I had to think about and interpret what I read while thinking about the participants' lived experiences. The "next task was to find connections across themes and to develop subordinate themes for each participant" (Smith et al., 2009 p. 74). The process to all emergent themes included writing down all themes on sticky notes. I then aligned the themes by implementing Smith et al.'s (2009) techniques. The technique of abstraction was implemented to put like themes with like themes. Subsumption was used to find the super-ordinate themes (developing a super-

ordinate theme to bring the related themes together). See Appendix F for a sample of the process. The technique of numeration was implemented to count the frequency of theme usage. The theme development process consisted of moving sticky notes back and forth. I used chart paper for each technique filling my basement floor with many charts covered with sticky notes.

I referred back to the analysis Table 4.2 and found it helpful to view and place photographs beside the themes that I felt they best represented. At that time, I thought about my research question and how the participants were *making-sense* of their lived experiences at the college.

Figure 4.6 provides an example of how this process evolved.

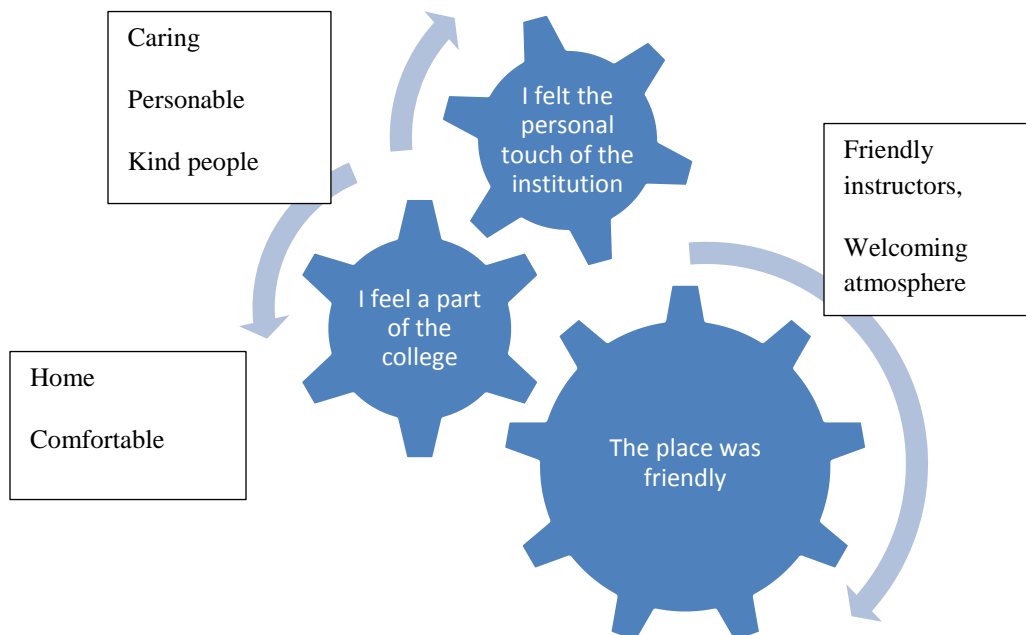


Figure 4.6 Thinking about the individual participant themes

I identified each theme and continued moving sticky notes around while looking across each subordinate theme to see what themes might emerge. I did this by moving the charts with the subordinate themes to a different spot on the basement floor and then viewed the charts. After developing emergent themes I identified subordinate

themes that helped create theme patterns for each participant. Themes were replaced until I found the relationship between the theme and the research sub-questions. Themes were subsumed by re-examining the transcript themes. I continued to implement the techniques identified by Smith et al. (2009) creating subordinate and super-ordinate themes. Abstraction assisted me in gathering themes together to create the subordinate individual and group themes. Subsumption was implemented to merge the themes into super-ordinate themes. The super-ordinate themes brought all related themes together. The technique of numeration (frequency of the theme) assisted with the creation of the master themes. Appendices D and F provide diagrams that illustrate how that process evolved.

After developing the individual participant themes, patterns across the group were identified. At this stage, I noticed how the themes were creating patterns. For example, the participants referred to the institution. Some described it and referred to how they fit into it. One theme started out as “the place was friendly,” but as I searched the themes and recollected what was said, that theme was subsumed into “I felt the personal touch of the institution.” Themes continued to be subsumed by re-examining the sticky notes. Themes continued to be subsumed into “I feel like a part of the college.” This process was repeated discovering that two other master themes evolved. All themes that were identified through the annotation process were eventually subsumed. Appendix D provides a sample of the subsumption process.

The next task was to look across the individual cases to identify the master themes for the group. To find the master themes, I laid out the charts on my basement floor and looked horizontally at each theme. The master theme “We belong” had three super-ordinate themes: we experienced a friendly and caring place; we found it easy to form relationships; we felt at home. Six out of 10 participants likened the college to a family and home experience. Eight out of 10 participants expressed that they found it easy to form relationships, and 10 out of 10 participants experienced the college as a friendly place. A total of 181 themes were subsumed within this master theme. The second master theme “We lived the learning” consists of three super-ordinate themes:

we trusted the people in the academic environment; we experienced meaningful knowledge and skills; we developed pride and ownership in our learning. Six out of 10 participants commented that they trusted people within the academic environment. Ten out of 10 participants identified they experienced meaningful learning while seven out of 10 participants identified that they took ownership in their learning. There were 108 themes subsumed within this master theme. The third master theme was “We had life-changing experiences.” There were three super-ordinate themes within this master theme: we were exposed to new ideas; we saw our world from a different perspective; feeling supported, we altered our thoughts. There were 138 themes subsumed within this master theme. Throughout the process, I was aware of individual expression.

An individual and group chart was developed to recognize how these processes unfolded. The techniques of abstraction and subsumption were implemented to create the themes. Table 4.3 indicates how individual themes evolved into master themes. This table maps the development journey of the individual emergent theme, individual super-ordinate theme, and subordinate group theme. According to Smith et al. (2009), implementing a process of description and interpretation creates themes which are usually expressed as a phrase which “speaks to the psychological essence” therefore capturing what is critical (p. 92).

Master Theme Group	We belong	We lived the learning	We had life-changing experiences
Subordinate theme for the group	We experienced a friendly and caring place	We trusted the people in the academic environment	We were exposed to new ideas
Super-ordinate themes for the individual	I feel a part of the college	I felt I could take risks in learning	I felt comfortable to grow and develop
Subordinate theme for the individual	I felt the personal touch of the institution	I trusted the faculty and my peers	I was able to experience so many new things
Emergent theme for the individual	The place was friendly	Bonding enhanced learning	Enrichment activities promote change

Table 4.3 *Sample how Master Theme Evolved from Emergent Theme, Individual to Group*

4.6 Value of Reflecting

4.6.1 Field notes.

Immediately following each interview, I kept field notes to capture the non-verbal cues and used reflection to help me understand the process. The reflection exercise allowed me time to deliberate about what happened during each interview. The notes assisted me when I referred back to each analysis table. Notes included inferences, impressions, and feelings about the interview. I also included a section called forward planning to assist me in thinking about the upcoming interview. Figure 4.7 provides a sample of Interview Field Notes.

Sample of Revised Interview Field Notes (*March 31, 2015*)

(Adapted from Gray, 2014)

Date: April 10, 2015

Time: 2:00 - 3:15 pm

Background Information:

Mark is an international student who was looking to go to either the United States or Canada to learn more about purebred cattle. He has been out of high school for about 4 or 5 years. Mark had no intentions of going back to school. However, once out in the real work world, he realized he did not know as much as he thought he did. So he got looking around, found XX and XXX. Prairie Site College contacted him and helped him get to Canada. Mark cannot believe how much Prairie Site staff and faculty and XXXX helped him out. Mark likened Prairie Site College to a family; indicating these people care about you. He noted how they came and picked him at the airport; they provided him with bedding and kitchen stuff. Although Mark partied hard the first-semester, he settled down the next semester. He noted that the dorm life was essential in getting the students out of their shells. Mark indicated the residence assistant (RA) encouraged him, and that was why he was able to meet so many people. They were excellent. Mark also believes the Delta dormitories are ideal for the second-year students. These students have learned about dorm life and how to get along with 30 people, so the opportunity to share with

another fellow student in the second-year was a perfect situation. Mark is a male student in the agricultural business program. He is a rodeo member who fights bulls and rides saddle broncs. Mark expressed this experience at Prairie Site College has been the best choice he has ever made. Mark envisions pursuing further education and is looking to the United States to enter a degree program, although if we had an applied degree in agriculture, he would stay here.

Ideas and inferences:

Mark is fun loving and understands how people have gone out of their way to make his stay at the college a pleasant one. Mark's spirit also assists in making things happen. His comments about the instructors are caring (the mannerisms in which he discussed them identify his gratefulness). He understands how much XXXX volunteers and has done for the students to help them learn. Mark alludes to the family of Prairie Site College and identifies how the students have created their own inclusive family at the college. Mark indicated, there is a healthy rivalry and competition between all the club members.

Impressions and Feelings:

Conducting these interviews has assisted me with concrete information on how awesome our instructors are. I note how important the resident assistant role was in helping the students settle into college life and learn to mingle with others. Dorm life provides a pivotal role for many students, helping them get involved and become a part of the institution. The clubs are valuable; we must find ways to provide little perks to keep them moving forward. Enhanced student life opportunities improve the college image.

Forward planning:

The interviews are getting better. It is easier to get in my questions in without disrupting the participant's story. As I look back to my test interview, I see myself more focused; my prompts became easier to get into the conversation. With Mark, I kept probing until I could get at what it meant to belong. I have about five interviews left, two next week and just waiting for the fourth to confirm. I will do an extra one if I can interview a student who lives on one campus and takes classes on a different campus. This information could be valuable. I have my system down. The student-managed farm room is booked which

creates a great atmosphere for the students. I have it booked for the next two interviews as well. I used the technique of snowballing the last four interviews. The participants have given leads to other students, and this has worked well. I now am looking for students with particular types of experiences to help me better understand student life. I wanted an international student from both campuses. My goal was to obtain participants from the selected program areas. I have a good cross-section of male versus female students. I have been able to get a perspective of the gym usage on both campuses. I see how the arena is being used by both genders.

Figure 4.7 Interview field notes

4.6.2 Internal reflecting.

Using field notes provided opportunities for me to reflect on each interview. Boud (2001) argues that writing can be a “form of self-reflection, a record of an event, or a form of therapy” (p. 9). Field notes provided a combination of all three of these ideas for me. Physically writing down my thoughts provided a way to understand better what I heard. Writing down my thoughts assisted me in *making-sense* as I pondered what I had put on paper. Writing provided me the opportunity to *think, be troubled, and then learn*.

4.6.3 External reflection.

The concept of critical friends was introduced as a technique to assist teaching methods (Dahlgren et al., 2006). Critical friends are viewed as “*sounding boards*” (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005, p. 13), *critical observers*, and “*trusted person*” (Dahlgren et al., 2006, p. 2) within the research world. They provide opportunities for the researcher to receive and reflect on critical feedback.

The critical friend takes the time to understand the researcher’s context, be supportive, and help in a constructive way. My supervisors provided this type of support from a distance. I also had support from some local colleagues whom I trusted and conversed with. They provided feedback when I needed a “*sounding boards*” (Swaffield

& MacBeath, 2005, p. 13), and posed provocative questions that assisted me in identifying my bias.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) indicate that ethical research practice involves a critical inspection in all areas. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) claim the researcher must engage in personal ethical decisions and adhere to institutional regulations.

In my situation, I adhered to all institutional policies, research regulations (i.e., University of Liverpool and Prairie Site College), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) guidelines. I also was aware that implementing the photo-elicitation technique could potentially be risky if the participants did not adhere to college privacy rules. Therefore, I was explicit when discussing with participants the social protocol of using the camera. Throughout my research project, I took care to inform and gain consent from participants. As a researcher, I was thoughtful and diligent in protecting the participants.

4.7.1 Inform and gain consent.

As an insider researcher, a researcher in my place of work, I was fully aware of the power issue of my position. The students knew me as the president of the institution. I wanted to make it explicit that my project was as a researcher and not as the president of the college. I discussed my student status and identified that I was seeking volunteers to help with my research. In keeping with institutional practices, I created a participant information sheet (PIS) that outlined my expected behavior to avoid any deceptions. The participant information sheet (Appendix A) included an invitation to participate in the study, identified the purpose of this research, and explained why the study was taking place. It also identified what would happen if students volunteered to participate. This description included information about the commitment of time, what participants needed to do, what I would be doing, and how our conversations would take place. The potential risks of the research were discussed,

and the participants were provided with an individual's contact information to reach if they were unhappy with the research process.

Smith et al. (2009) contend that consent must be gained not only for collecting data but also for using verbatim extracts. Gaining permission from participants to use photographs was also important. At each pre-meeting, participants were provided with the details of my research, and consent forms were discussed with each participant.

Before each interview took place, the consent form was discussed in detail, and participants were asked to sign the form and informed of their right to withdraw from the research. Smith et al. (2009) state that withdrawal is usually at the stage of data collection and up to a certain point before either "data analysis or publication" (p. 53). I also saw the decision-making position as a powerful option for the participants by allowing them to stop the recorder or decline from answering any questions. Reflecting on this power angle, I ensured participants were able to make decisions if they chose to do so.

4.7.2 Protecting the participants.

I was conscious of the need for anonymity and that each participant's views must be protected. Wiles, Crow, Heath, and Charles (2008) note the importance of "finding ways that ensure individuals cannot be identified" (p. 418). I used pseudonyms to protect participants and the institution. Furthermore, Trowler (2011) indicates the insider researcher must take careful heed to ensure the participants cannot be recognized.

I also did not want to harm the participants in any way. I was aware that the process of recalling past experiences might be sensitive and wanted to protect the participants. In anticipation of any issues, I spoke with the wellness coordinator at the institution who agreed to be available if needed.

Passwords were in place on my computer, iPhone, and iPad to ensure the security of participant information. This meant my devices were on a server and only accessible with administrative permissions. All other research-related information, field

notes, photographs, and any printed data was stored in a locked drawer in a locked room. To further manage the security of material, all raw data was only accessible to me. Data will be stored in a secure place for five years and then shredded.

It was my duty to create an honest and thoughtful inquiry. I believe this was evident in my conscientious treatment of participants. I realized my ethical practices were only a prevention exercise and did not guarantee unethical issues from occurring.

However, incorporating the idea of being sensitive to each aspect of this research, I complied with policies and regulations related to doing research.

4.8 Fulfilling Credibility Criteria

To show that this was credible research, I referred to how other researchers understood what they had done. According to Smith et al. (2009), guidelines and checklists are often easy to implement; however, being sensitive to the participants' experiences is more difficult to manage. Whitehead (2004) states there is a need to link methods and methodology while Smith et al. (2009) claim that Yardley's (2000) criteria can be "applied irrespective of the theoretical orientation" (p. 179). Creswell and Miller (2000) claim that researchers need to validate the choices they make while Koch (2006) suggest that developing a decision trail is a way to checking the trustworthiness of the research. For an interpretative phenomenological analysis, Smith et al. (2009) suggests this means keeping track of research question identification, the research proposal, iPhone recordings, all participants' transcripts and analysis sheets, theme charts, and final report. I adopted Yardley's (2000) four broad principles—(a) sensitivity to context, (b) commitment and rigour, (c) transparency and coherence, and (d) impact and importance—to provide details of how I went about doing my research (Koch, 2006).

4.8.1 Sensitivity to context.

Smith et al. (2009) claim that being sensitive throughout the interview means "showing empathy, putting participants at ease" within the interview, taking time to listen, and understanding each participant's context (p. 180). Sensitivity must remain

throughout the entire research process. Sensitivity is showed by paying attention to the details and the themes that have been uncovered, and this thoughtfulness continues ensuring the findings are validated with verbatim extracts from participants (Smith et al., 2009).

Throughout the interview process, participants were encouraged to tell their stories. With the use of photo-elicitation, I was able to view, listen to, and empathize with participants. As they told their stories, I listened with intent providing a few prompts to clarify meaning. After data collection, I followed the interpretative phenomenological analysis. Chamberlain (2011) identified it is important to incur a *double hermeneutic process* in an IPA study. A double hermeneutic process involves two different *sensemaking processes*. First, there is the sense-making process that the participant is going through by telling his/her story. The second process is the analysis that the researcher is going through. I undertook the analysis process to create all themes (subordinate, super-ordinate, and master themes).

4.8.2 Commitment and rigour.

In preparation, I performed a test interview. The individual who participated in the test interview provided feedback that assisted me in modifying the photo-elicitation technique. Providing a welcoming and comfortable environment, I took great care to listen and honor what the participants expressed. I sought out individuals who were graduating and lived on campus. To ensure a good cross-section of participants, I engaged with students from five of the six schools (academic divisions within the college). I participated in several training sessions to improve my interviewing skills. These skills were critical in picking up cues and delving deeper into what the participants were expressing. Keeping in tune with a systematic approach, I followed the interpretative phenomenological analysis method of creating participant analysis table sheets. This approach provided me with reference materials for developing emerging themes, subordinate themes, super-ordinate themes, and master themes.

Each interpretative phenomenological analysis technique (abstraction, subsumption, and numeration) provided a systematic procedure for developing themes.

Smith et al.'s (2009) suggested techniques assisted me in moving beyond the participants' descriptions. Ten participants were interviewed, and throughout the process, I made an effort to capture each participant's *voice* where it was applicable.

4.8.3 Transparency and coherence.

In the spirit of transparency, I acknowledged the interpretative practice and described in detail the participant selection and how interviews were constructed. To create a systematic procedure, I followed suggested protocols and processes. This practice ensured the study plan included the purpose and procedures of this research project. Detailed descriptions were also identified within the participant information sheets. Descriptive tables throughout the thesis illustrate the procedures taken thus providing a method to trace the steps of my research journey.

The decision trail establishes audit linkages which suggest explicitly identifying the decisions made regarding "the theoretical, methodological, and analytic choices throughout the study" (Koch, 1994, 2006, p. 92). I have explicitly identified how decisions were made. Identifying the process of data collection emphasized my choice to utilize semi-structured interviews, photo-elicitation, and appreciative inquiry. Keeping reflective field notes highlighted my thoughts and feelings and assisting me in implementing reflexivity as a tool to better understand what I did.

I felt a good *fit* between the intent of this research, the students' verification of transcripts, my theoretical framework, interpretative phenomenological analysis, and the techniques I implemented.

4.8.4 Impact and importance.

Smith et al. (2009) suggest that however well a piece of research is conducted, the "test of its real validity lies in whether the reader finds something of it interesting, important, or useful" (p. 183). Reflecting on the impact of this research, I thought about

my conversations with our Senior Leadership Team and, in particular, the Academic Vice President.

Providing him with details from the participants' stories put in motion the idea of a better student life program. Following more discussions, our senior leadership team decided to hire a manager of student life.

As I interacted with faculty, this new knowledge was shared by indicating the type of learning experiences participants' favored. Presenting my findings at the new faculty orientation offered an opportunity to examine pedagogical practices that enhanced active learning. Thinking about Smith et al.'s (2009) comment, I am hopeful that by discussing with faculty the types of experiences the participants appreciated, other educators will take away some ideas to promote better post-secondary experiences.

4.9 Summary

I chose 10 participants to interview concentrating on *making-sense of the particular* with the purpose of enhancing student experiences at Prairie Site College. Participants were selected through a purposive method (Tongco, 2007), and the snowballing method was applied to seek a specific population (Browne, 2005). The findings revealed useful evidence for the wider population. However, this study was not about discovering generalities among the greater population.

The semi-structured interview was implemented as the suitable process to illuminate participants' voices. As a pre-interview technique, the method of photo-elicitation was implemented providing participants the opportunity to create their data. I performed a test interview to *try out* my methods as a way to collect feedback and make adjustments to my procedures. The test interview supplemented my research procedure by giving me confidence to engage with participants.

After each interview, the recorded message was transcribed, analysis charts were created for each participant, and the interpretative phenomenological analysis process provided a systematic method to *make sense* of data. The steps in this process included identifying within the transcript the areas of descriptive, linguistic, and

conceptual comments. Once themes were identified, Smith et al.'s (2009) methods of abstraction, subsumption, and numeration were implemented to sort out themes.

Reflection provided an important practice as Boud (2001) specified implementing reflective tools promotes knowledge. I used field notes and critical friends (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009) to think about my actions and thoughts in an attempt to better understand my research.

To ensure my practices were ethical, I followed the protocols set out by the University of Liverpool, Prairie Site College and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Adhering to all institutional policies and procedures, being conscious of my insider researcher role, I identified the possible power and confidentiality issues and ensured all the proper permissions were obtained and that each participant abided by the social conventions of taking photographs.

Checking the quality and implementing appropriate approaches is an important part of conducting qualitative research (Smith et al., 2009). To ensure rigour and trustworthiness, I used Yardley's criteria recommended by Smith et al. (2009). Yardley (2000) presented four broad principles. These principles provided a framework to discuss topics and identified each step taken within the research process.

I attempted to show how this research was credible. I clearly communicated my interactions and was sensitive to my role as a researcher within a place of work.

In Chapter 5 the findings will be discussed.

Chapter 5

Findings

This chapter presents the findings that emerged from the interviews with the participants and answers the research questions identified in chapter 3. Findings are presented in three sections; each is introduced by a table presenting an overview of what I termed a Master Theme. The Master Theme is a culmination of super-ordinate themes which are the final versions of the analysis process that incorporated “like” themes. Participants’ photographs were included as data that was used in the analysis contributing to theme development. The chapter concludes by reviewing the research findings.

5.1 Master Theme One: We Belong

Subordinate Theme	Tom	Miko	Andi	Jack	Holly	Jade	Larry	Mark	Taylor	Alex
We experienced a friendly and caring place	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
We found it easy to form relationships	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
We felt at home	X	X	X			X		X		X

Table 5.1 *Master Theme One*
Key: X denotes an affirmative response

5.1.1 We experienced a friendly and caring place.

All participants identified the college as a welcoming, friendly place where they felt comfortable making it easier to interact with others and engage in conversations. Miko shared her feelings regarding how the college’s positive environment supported learning.

The very first-year I came to the college there were about 20 of us who attended the orientation. Five of the people that I met at that course are still my friends. Everyone was friendly with me. This made everything so much easier. I had

friends to go to my first classes with, to write my tests with, and study with, and I never had an awkward transition stage. (Miko, lines 88-97)

When Miko came to the college, she identified feeling overwhelmed by the size of the institution, acknowledging that she came from a small hamlet and being shy made it difficult to reach out to others. However, people's friendliness assisted her in feeling more comfortable. Being away from home can be difficult for learners. Jade used the metaphor that she was welcomed with open arms when she first came to the institution. In this situation she identified how she felt within her academic community, recognizing her feelings of inclusion, even though she was not from the agricultural community.

You walk through the doors, and you think oh man this is going to be intense, and then everyone just welcomes you with open arms. They try to help you wherever they can. The instructors are so good, the people you meet, and they don't care what your background is. Everyone just tries to welcome you. (Jade, lines 77-85)

Mark also provided an example of how faculty and staff members at the college supported him in getting from the airport to the campus and helped him settle into campus life.

They set me up really well. They picked me up in front of the airport. They set me up with some cooking utensils, and they had blankets, and all that 'cause I didn't bring anything like that on the plane. They looked after me really well. They said if I ever needed anything to let them know. They offered to take me shopping and all that stuff until I got settled into the college. Definitely, they helped me out a lot and made me feel comfortable. (Mark, lines 72-81)

I like Prairie Site College a lot more than the other institutions I've attended. I feel like the college is like a small community. Our college is small. You get to know lots of people. The environment is more fun when you recognize people, and they engage with you. In this environment you have people to lean on, people to study with, people to go and do things with. These people were my neighbors and living with them we got close. (Larry, lines 191-199 & 268-274)



Figure 5.1 Larry's bonding

Larry compared the college to a small community. She identified the environment as an easy place to connect with others, noting the size of the campus made it easier to engage. She referenced feeling accepted and cared about within her academic division. The term *community* seemed to identify a place where people were friendly and caring. These extracts from participants' transcripts demonstrate that participants experienced feeling welcomed, supported, and cared about which set the stage for being comfortable to interact with others.

5.1.2 We found it easy to form relationships.

Miko spoke about her memory of living with other students on campus and the relationships she formed.

We became the Smith's Place family. I got my friend to put her hands over our dorm sign (The photograph was an image of hands in a heart shape). It was the best year of my life, being in that dorm. Since that dorm experience (a co-ed experience) he has moved on. However, to this date, that dorm mate is still my best friend. It was a sad day but a good day when my friend graduated. (Miko, lines 500-511)



Figure 5.2 Miko's home

Feeling comfortable and supported provided Miko the courage to engage with other individuals. Similarly, Larry noted that she also felt that the friendliness of people in the small town made a difference in her ability to engage with others. Classmates created friendly and helpful academic communities by working together and supporting each other.

I got asked to be on the team in my second-year, and it was awesome. It was so much fun, and our team really got along. We were like a little family, and that was a lot of fun. (Miko, lines 283-287)

Participant Larry discussed the importance of having friends.

You're not always friends with all your neighbors because they are going to be different ages in the real world. But here at the college, it's like this collection of ages with similar goals, and that's been cool. I think that is what makes college fun. You are just hanging out with a big group of people that are all the same age. (Larry, lines 282-290)

Taylor noted how engagement with faculty and other students provided a good experience and helped him create networks with his chosen academic community.

I also really bonded with the teachers and I really got into it. It's like there are no boundaries between students and teachers, it was really fun. I come from a big city. It was a culture shock at first, but I think I am fully adapted. I met people who played basketball, and they are now my friends. Going shooting hoops, it brings you together. Then once you are together, you can relate to them, and they become friends in class as well. (Taylor, lines 21-24 & 35-42)



Figure 5.3 Taylor's favorite place

Taylor compared his involvement with the experiences his brother had at an institution in the city. Taylor noted the differences between a small rural college and a large university offering a similar program as providing a very different experience. He found a sense of belonging within his academic community and felt a connection that his brother did not feel.

I'm in all classes from stats to botany. We interact with each other in labs every day and in other labs weekly. It is really a hands-on experience. I compared this experience to my brother's experience. He is taking a similar program at the X of X. His field trip experience calculates into about three weeks for the whole program. This is all the hands-on experience he gets within this four-year course. He also pays extra for these field trips. He does all of this lab work but says it is hard to retain all the information when there was no hands-on experience to understand the concept. Unlike me, in my program, we're out every week doing stuff. With every experience, we can hone in on our outdoors skills while interacting with other students. (Taylor, lines 66-74)

Learning in a friendly, interactive environment helped students feel supported and assisted them in experiencing successful learning outcomes. These engagements supported the students in feeling a strong bond within their academic fields of study.

5.1.3 We felt at home.

Six out of 10 participants said they felt at home at the institution. They noted that it was easy for them to make positive connections in a friendly and caring environment.

Participants indicated the sense of feeling at home within their academic communities was important. However, they also identified the importance of support staff welcoming them.

I think it's a Prairie Site College thing, honestly, because when I talk to students from other colleges, they don't get this feeling. Our instructors really take pride in getting us ready, so we are learning stuff. They push us to go the extra step and learn. I think the significance for me is my instructors cared about me. (Miko, lines 213-216)

The comment “it’s a Prairie Site College thing” was referenced by other participants. I identified this *thing* as feelings and connections--a sense of being at home within the institution. Andi stated, “it’s my second home, my little second home” (Andi, lines 123-124). Alex stated “it was my home away from home” (Alex, lines 11-12).



Figure 5.4 Alex’s home away from home

The word *home* certainly describes a place which has a significant impact. I found it interesting that five participants referred to the word home while three participants used the word family. I see the word family closely connected to how the participants symbolized the word home. One participant referred to the whole college as her home when describing walking across the caps to study whereas Mark spoke more specifically about his academic unit as being his tight-knit family.

I feel we are a tight family. It's a pretty cool learning environment when you know you get along really well with your teachers, you know, that's pretty cool that in the end, they are your friends. You know, it's a pretty cool learning environment. (Mark, lines 539-551)



Figure 5.5 Mark's cool learning environment

Participants indicated they felt a “sense of family.” I feel the word family used within this context links with the feeling of being comfortable. The sense of family was also noted in Jade’s comment, “I’m part of the Prairie Site College family” (Jade, lines 85-86). Larry suggested there was something special about the college in how the individuals interacted with each other. She stated that she had never experienced anything like “this” within the other institutions she had attended (Larry, line 87).

I believe her *feelings* were deeper than that of feeling welcomed; she sensed being part of the institution. Participants used the word “bond” and spoke of “bonding” when working through difficult challenges they faced together.

I was shy, shyder probably in the first semester and then I slowly got into a group of friends. Now I can say hi to everyone. I know a lot more people than I did and I am now more comfortable. (Taylor, lines 440-448)

Andi referred to how easy it was to integrate within the institution, recognizing the college as a place where she could connect. To her surprise, she created some lasting relationships.

You know at first I was coming to a city where I knew no one, no connections, no

aunts or uncles that live here, or that I could go and visit. I was a bit of a loner, but now living in dorms really helped because I got to meet people right away. In fact one of my roommates from last year is going to be a bridesmaid in my wedding; we are super close. I get along with all my roommates, and it has been a really great experience to be able to live with them. My experiences will last me a lifetime. (Andi, lines 37-51)

Jack also identified it was important to know everyone and the family feeling supported him in feeling a part of the institution. He arrived as an international student who was not sure he wanted to even learn about Canada.

It's like a family. Because it's small, regardless of all your activities, once you are in your fourth-year you know most people. Especially being on the Students' Association, the students know me, the staff knows me, and faculty knows me. It seems like everybody on the whole campus knows me. Plus I work in residence, so I know all of these people. I know the caretaking staff; it seems I know everyone from the bottom to the top of Prairie Site College. (Jack, lines 70-89)



Figure 5.6 Jack feeling comfortable

Participants who felt at home within the college spoke about the positive interactions they experienced: a place where people were friendly and supportive. They suggested they were able to bond with others. They talked about a family and referred to the college as *home*. I suggest participants were feeling a sense of trust as they interacted with individuals at the college.

The master theme *We Belong* partially addresses the primary question: **how do students, who have engaged with the learning opportunities at Prairie Site College, make sense of being engaged in these experiences?** A sense of belonging is one of two aspects identified within this study as assisting participants in making sense of their experiences.

One factor in answering my primary question was identified as belonging and this was noted as an element that can enhance student's engagement within the post-secondary institutional setting. All participants noted the significance of *belonging* and *being engaged*, although the examples of how these experiences were internalized by participants were different. For example, Jade and Miko spoke of the importance of feeling welcomed, and experiencing friendly and caring people as their way of feeling a sensing of belonging. Andi spoke of the importance of meaningful connections and these types of engagements provided her with the feeling of belonging. Tom identified interacting with others through social events at the college as a way of belonging, while Larry noted class activities where she connected with both faculty and class members assisted her in feeling engaged and provided a sense of belongingness.

My findings indicate a sense of belonging provided a significant factor in assisting the learners to become engaged in academic pursuits. The components of the master theme *We Belong* provided valuable knowledge in why belongingness supports the post-secondary student's engagement.

The master theme *We Belong* also addresses the sub-question: **when students recall their experiences at Prairie Site College what is important to them?**

Belongingness was a key element. Participants identified two aspects that were important to them when learning in a post-secondary environment therefore the master theme *We Belong* only partially answers this sub-question.

The sense of belonging was noted as an important feature when participants told their stories. Belonging was noted when participants spoke of their relationships with others. Miko and Taylor identified how they developed relationships with other students and indicated the earlier they got to know others, the better they were able to engage

and feel comfortable. Participants indicated they needed to develop positive relationships with other students to be engaged in learning. Furthermore, Alex expressed when she felt *at home* she was better able to engage in her academic pursuits. Jack suggested it took him much longer to feel fully involved. He identified once he got to know more individuals he felt more comfortable learning. For more detail, the questions and themes are mapped out in Appendix H.

5.2 Master Theme Two: We Lived the Learning

Subordinate Theme	Tom	Miko	Andi	Jack	Holly	Jade	Larry	Mark	Taylor	Alex
We trusted the people in the academic environment	X	X			X	X		X		X
We experienced meaningful knowledge and skills	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
We developed pride and ownership in our learning		X	X		X	X		X	X	X

Table 5.2 Master Theme: We Lived the Learning

5.2.1 We trusted the people in the academic environment.

Six out of 10 participants indicated they trusted people at the college and felt their support. Trust is a major factor in creating relationships (Kavanaugh, Moro, Savage, & Mehendale, 2006).

I've been at the college for one year. I'm graduating, and I'm sad about that. I'm like kind of fighting for any way to come back to Prairie Site College, but it's not the most economical. It's the environment that really worked for me. I think I was really grateful to be here because I had done the XX thing, and the X thing,

so coming to Prairie Site College and seeing the difference was a motivating factor in itself. I just felt grateful to be here, it is such a different environment, really different, and much more awesome, much better, yeah! I trusted the instructors and my classmates and really want to find an economical way to come back. (Larry, lines 197-203)

Tom saw friendship and interactions as important.

It was a little awkward at first. I'm not really an outgoing kind of person. In the beginning, it took me a little while to feel comfortable. But everybody was easy to talk with. Everybody got along. It might have been because we are all in the same boat. It only took a couple of weeks and then I was chatting with everybody. I got to know everybody and felt comfortable doing things with them. It didn't make you miss home nearly as much when I made some new friends. (Tom, lines 58-71)

Tom was quieter and more reserved than many of the other participants, although when he spoke about his friend he seemed more relaxed. Tom appeared confident when he talked about the support and trust he had from his buddies. He noted he engaged more with others as his friendships grew. Miko also talked about her connections with other students. Her dialogue indicated how her comfort level changed as she became more confident.

Learning to talk to the instructors was really big to me. I found it easier to help others in my second-year. Being on the Students' Association, we organized activities. We organized a potluck dinner. Everyone brought a different meal from somewhere, and we got to sit down and eat together and just talk. It was super exciting, we had a very successful night, and everybody just made meals from their heritage. It was fun, we got to listen to some different music from different cultures, and the night was full of fellowship. (Miko, Lines 155-177)

As Miko adjusted to the college environment she felt a sense of fellowship and this assisted her in feeling more comfortable. Her positive interactions at the college created a sense of trust that was not felt at the other educational settings she attended. Holly also noted her increased involvement with others increased.

I like being able to talk to your teachers and form a relationship with them. They also meet with me after school, going the extra mile to help me. They visit with me in the mornings before class and have coffee with me; I like that. I get

treated like a person. I'm older now; it is nice to have people talk to you. (Holly, lines 22-17)

Holly's former experience with academics was less than positive. Consequently, she found it difficult to believe the faculty would spend the time to help her. Prairie Site College's friendly atmosphere and the supportive faculty made it easy for her to trust in them. She used the term "extra mile" in this situation to refer to faculty who took the time to tutor her at 6 o'clock in the morning. With their support and guidance, she found it easy to build positive relationships and trust them. Taylor also spoke of bonding with the teachers.

It probably took me a year to fully adapt to a smaller college. I was able to bond with teachers; it's kind of like there are no boundaries, and I feel comfortable with them. It's very hands-on I mean we are in labs every day or weekly in every course. There are lots of interactions with other students. (Taylor, lines 355-360)

Taylor came from a large city and seemed to feel out of place until faculty and students interacted with him. As he discussed his interactions at the college, there appeared to be a sense of trust in college personnel and students. As participants described their experiences, I noticed how the words *easy* and *comfortable* closely linked to the word trust. Trust seemed to be built on encouragement and support from faculty and students. As participants spoke of their relationships with staff, faculty, and other students, I noted trust was a significant factor in creating encouraging exchanges. The foundation of trust creates willingness for students to take risks in learning.

5.2.2 We experienced meaningful knowledge and skills.

All participants shared that their educational experiences were meaningful when they were involved in hands-on learning experiences.

I like just all the things Prairie Site College puts on, all the activities. I learned so much from real life activities. I'll name a few, prairie nights, awards banquet, wellness fair, college fashion show, and all the awesome stuff the SA puts on. It's pretty amazing; I've never seen this at the other places I have been. (Larry, lines 255-267)

Larry indicated the learning activities were more meaningful when they incorporated real-life practices. These activities changed her feelings about education, enabling her to envision how learning could be relevant to the real world. Applying what she learned provided her with a new eagerness to seek out more knowledge and dig even deeper to understand more. The encouragement from the trusted faculty made it easier to ask questions and find answers for the unknown.

I learned by trying. Prairie Site College helped me feel more comfortable. The instructors were good and encouraged me to try. The Resident Assistant (RA) would encourage you to come and try to associate with everyone; this helped me get out of my box. I had fun with my friends in the dorm. This is in the riding arena where we were watching a faculty rodeo. (Tom, lines 91-98)



Figure 5.7 Enjoying the fun rodeo

Tom found learning stressful; nevertheless, working with others in an environment of trust assisted him in overcoming these feelings. As well, the individuals who were fearful felt safe surrounded by people who cared and provided support as they worked through their issues. Holly also indicated the real-world labs made a difference in her ability to understand new concepts. She noted her problems in attempting to understand the water flow within the stream lab.

We had to draw all this stuff and learn how to trace lines. My first-year was crazy. I had no idea how to trace lines. They would say, go trace where the pipe went, and I would be trying to create a 3D diagram. It was just all over the place. The instructors really helped me out. My first-year was really tough because I was not familiar with anything. The hands-on experience in the lab and practicums helped me a lot. The teachers also helped. Although I didn't

understand the tracing lines, doing it helped me in understanding the water flow, pressure and the importance of temperature. This was big for me. (Holly, lines 309-324)



Figure 5.8 Holly's diagram



Figure 5.9 The real lab

It was not until Holly, a power engineering student, was able to physically trace the pipes that she understood the concept of water flow and pressure issues. The diagrams were useful and provided some context, but the real understanding was recognized when there was a real opportunity to touch the pipes. When Holly saw the pipes and followed where they went, she understood the meaning of water flow. As well, Mark stated that the real skills learned in the student-managed farm provided

actual examples of the concepts being studied (Mark, lines 643-644). The student-managed farm provided students the opportunity to engage in every aspect of the farm operations. They made decisions, facilitated by faculty, justifying what they did to an advisory board. The participants spoke of being questioned and supported in this type of learning environment and how educational it was for them.



Figure 5.10 Mark's student-managed farm experience

Similarly, Alex spoke of the positive challenges she faced within another student-led operation on campus indicating that her learning experiences prepared her for the world of work (Alex, lines 40-52).

I think one of the main accomplishments at Prairie Site College for me was being able to speak more comfortably. I was able to have a better understanding of the English language or the way you guys use the English language versus how we use it in XXXX. We use a more English version; you guys use a more American version, so it's different. I was able to understand you guys, but you guys are somewhat reluctant to understand me. I guess reluctant isn't the choice of word, just maybe my accent is difficult to understand. I was young, I guess somewhat naïve as a typical teenager, wanting to get as far away from home as possible. I jumped at the opportunity to come on an exchange. It's history and I am still here. (Jack, lines 12-18 & 209-218)

Jack, an international student, wanted to visit another country although it seemed that he was not prepared for a different learning experience.

He struggled with the use of the English language realizing he was able to understand the American version of the English language better than some Canadian people were able to understand him. He realized that he gained knowledge and noted he was still learning.

Jade was eager to learn but found some of the academic material overwhelming without prior knowledge of agriculture. She indicated that most students in her program came from farming backgrounds. However, the concrete activities and field trips supported her learning (Jade, lines 22-27). For Jade, hands-on learning made the difference in her understanding.



Figure 5.11 Jade's field trip experience

The real-life lessons provided tangible activities that participants felt to be significant in their development and achievement. Although learning is personal, participants who experienced interactions within the environment and engaged with individuals who assisted them were able to learn in ways they might not have thought possible.

5.2.3 We developed pride and ownership in our learning.

Seven out of 10 participants indicated positive learning experiences assisted them in developing a sense of pride in knowing. They were able to develop skills and

felt confident in their new-found knowledge. Andi indicated her academic experience was amazing.

My experiences will last me a lifetime. It's significant to my life because I applied at XX but didn't meet the qualifications to go to university. Coming to college was really important. My fiancé is in Glasgow in Vet Med; we are hoping to open up a clinic together. I got two or three scholarships and had no idea I could pull this off. It really made me grow, and I felt I was able to accomplish things that other people could do. (Andi, lines 105-116)

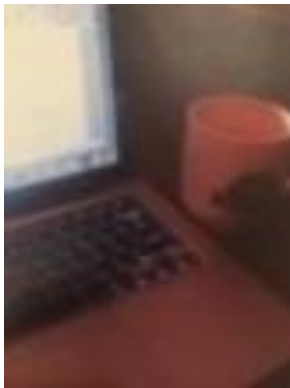


Figure 5.12 Andi's learning experience



Figure 5.13 Andi's success

Andi noted her college experiences had a substantial impact on her life. She was proud that she was able to receive scholarships. Being acknowledged for her abilities enhanced her academic development and provided her with confidence and

self-assurance that did not seem to exist in her last academic experience. Holly also indicated how important her educational experience was.

I work in the lab now for money helping commission the new part of the lab. I never graduated from high school so to me this was like my first big step. I didn't even need my GED to get into this course, so this graduation, getting my diploma, was important. I could finally say look, I did this on my own. It makes me glow; I can't explain like I am so happy. The biggest thing in this college is the atmosphere and the friends you make. (Holly, lines 83-87 & 851-853)

Holly was hired at the college and felt proud that she could apply her skills and was prepared for employment.

Miko identified how success assisted her in getting involved with others.

I was engaged in everything. I got asked to be on the Students' Association at the college which changed my life drastically. I spend every waking minute of my day at the college instead of staying in my dorm. Whether it is homework or the SA activities, which is how I spend my days, from my second-year to the fourth-year. I was here every day, from 9 until 6. I don't leave, and it's my home now. I like being here. (Miko, lines 351-362)



Figure 5.14 Miko loves spending time at Prairie Site College

Miko felt supported and wanted to try all the activities the college had to offer. She spoke with pride when she showed me the photograph of her participation in a fundraising event. Getting involved in the Students' Association changed the way Miko

interacted with others at the college. Similarly, Alex spoke of her changes and how confident she felt.

I feel confident to talk to anyone. I can walk through the halls, and I pretty much know everyone that I see. I can say hi to them, and I can stand and chat with them. I guess at the beginning I didn't know what to expect, you don't know how hard the course was going to be. I didn't know how mean the teachers were going to be. It's challenging to learn but if you work for it and when you finish, it is worth it. (Alex, lines 351-362)



Figure 5.15 Alex's learnings

Alex was proud of her role as resident assistant as she was able to encourage other students in their academic and social experiences. She indicated concerns about her shyness and difficulty in speaking with others; however, after her Prairie Site College experience, she graduated with confidence and self-esteem. Alex felt proud of stopping in the halls and being able to speak to anyone. Speaking seemed to be something Alex was unable to do when she first came on campus. Likewise, Tom was also proud when he spoke of achievements and his confidence in being able to engage with others (Tom, lines 223-226).

Participants that graduated indicated they were leaving the college with a sense of pride and ownership for what they had accomplished. Mark's comments noted his ownership.

In the program here, there is a lot of sense of pride from the staff and the students when it comes to the cattle and the facilities. There is a big sense of ownership that we all end up getting through the student-managed farm. I think you know the way it is set up. It's great that we can take charge to a point and, it really lets us grab the ball and run with it and see how far we can go. We try to make it the best we can, and it's not really controlled by the teachers, they only advise us. (Mark, lines 216-224)



Figure 5.16 Mark's sense of pride

Mark spoke of the student-managed farm as if it was his. He took pride in describing some of the activities he was involved with particularly how he was able to apply his knowledge by demonstrating to others and being able to defend the farming decisions the team had made.

Living the learning meant getting involved, understanding what real-life activities entailed, and not being afraid to explore and try new ways. Pride and the sense of ownership developed in positive interactions with individuals that students trusted and felt cared about them. Learning also meant stepping outside of existing comfort zones to explore and be willing to take chances. These types of learning activities were empowering. Nevertheless, at the time the participants felt overwhelmed. However, with encouragement and support from friendly, caring individuals, students were able to step forward, learn, develop, grow, and achieve.

The master theme *We Lived the Learning* provides the second factor to the primary question: **how do students, who have engaged with the learning opportunities at Prairie Site College, make sense of being engaged in these experiences?** In this study, *We Lived the Learning* refers to real world learning experiences and was the second aspect identified as important to assisting participants' *making-sense* of being engaged within the post-secondary institution.

Authentic learning activities or real world learning was a factor that enhanced student engagement. Participants noted that when they were actively engaged in authentic learning experiences, *making-sense* of the topic was easier. Tom noted the importance of feeling comfortable within his learning environment, while Mark identified how meaningful learning was within the student-managed farm unit. He elaborated on the process of learning by doing, which entailed working with large animals to prepare them to show. He discussed the knowledge he gained while preparing for projects that he presented to industry. Larry identified that the real-life practice activities were more meaningful and assisted her in a better understanding of concepts.

The master theme *we Lived the Learning* also addressed the sub-question: **what significant factors in academic programs do students identify as engaging?**

Within this study two aspects were identified as important. Belonging was the first aspect that participants' identified as significant to their academic engagement and real world learning was identified as the second factor. Participants noted that they wanted to engage in the real life learning experiences. Tom spoke of trusting individuals within the sheep unit and how this trust gave him confidence to have the courage to try new experiences. Likewise, Miko suggested that within the authentic learning environment, when there was trust she was able to feel comfortable in exploring different perspectives. Participants indicated they wanted to experience meaningful learning activities. For example, Jade identified how meaningful the field-trips were in helping her gain new knowledge and skills. Mark spoke of the student-managed farm as an educational experience that increased his knowledge and how the group learning encouraged him to dig deeper into perfecting his skills and awareness.

5.3 Master Theme Three: We had Life-Changing Experiences

Subordinate Theme	Tom	Miko	Andi	Jack	Holly	Jade	Larry	Mark	Taylor	Alex
We were exposed to new ideas	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
We saw our world from a different perspective	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Feeling supported, we altered our thoughts and actions	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X

Table 5.3 Master Theme: We had Life-Changing Experiences

5.3.1 We were exposed to new ideas.

All participants indicated they had opportunities to learn something new.

I was exposed to so many new things. One thing that I noticed since coming to the college is getting outside my safe zone. The college encouraged everyone to get out and have fun with others instead of just doing your own thing. Thanks to Prairie Site College encouragement, I have gained many friends that I can keep in touch with after college. (Tom, lines 211-225)



Figure 5.17 Tom's friends made the difference

Tom came to the institution to learn not realizing what he would gain from the college experience. Feeling confident to try something new was enhanced when participants felt they were supported and empowered by others. Larry noted:

Being exposed to many ideas, I have grown up. I'm motivated to learn because I have people here that want to see me succeed, people here that want to study, people here that you are close enough to that they are like "why aren't you working on a project like it is due in 2 days". I don't know; it is friends that actually care. It's different; all these qualities motivate me to learn more. It's a good environment. (Larry, lines 795-807)

Larry notes people at the college cared about her success, and she found the academic environment motivating as it assisted with her learning and development. Likewise, Miko indicated that when she became involved in the Students' Association, it changed her world (Miko, lines 350-353).

I saw things differently. I dropped out, you know, being a teenager and stuff. When I decided to come back, it was a challenge. If only you knew the girl I used to be, I can't explain, it makes you a whole new person, a better feeling, more self-esteem, more confidence just to go into the world. (Holly, lines 563-574)

Holly also acknowledged her growth. She came to college with the intent to *better herself* but not knowing where to start. Holly was able to make choices that enhanced her ability and lifestyle. She referred to being a whole new person. I sensed that Holly's perspective of the world changed as a result of her time at college. Perhaps her success within the learning environment or her interactions with caring faculty assisted her in reexamining her life. I sensed it was a combination of the learning experiences and the people she trusted. Similarly, Mark indicated he was exposed to the student-managed farm which helped him grow in ways he did not imagine (Mark, lines 259-264). Likewise, Alex indicated she experienced new things and learned (Alex, lines 102-106), while Taylor explained how he learned to cook and created a more healthy lifestyle while he was living on campus (Taylor, lines 403-406). When participants felt supported, they were able to venture out of their comfort zones and attempt new challenges. Jade spoke of her life changes.

I am not a hermit in my dorm now. Prairie Site College staff put on many events to bring the students together. It is a good opportunity to meet everyone, so you don't feel so scared and alone. I find that having a roommate in the first-year is like living in a house. Having a roommate also helps because then you have

somebody else who is going through the same things you're going through. In a way it's like home, you are both trying to figure out things, and it's really nice to have the support system in the dorms. (Jade, lines 728-748)

Attending college can be overwhelming and difficult for the new student. The support within a friendly atmosphere, as Jade indicated, enabled students to venture out of their comfort zones, trust others, and attempt new experiences.

New ideas and learning can be overwhelming, yet when there is support and encouragement within an atmosphere of trust, confidence can be increased. All participants realized that being exposed to new experiences, taking risks in learning, along with the willingness to reach out and learn, brought growth in their lives. The participants who were open to new ideas were able to examine their experiences from a different perspective.

5.3.2 We saw our world from different perspectives.

Nine out of ten participants acknowledged that their life views were altered. They were able to articulate that seeing multiple perspectives encouraged new ways of thinking. Andi indicated this.

I didn't expect my views would change. I have grown here. I never thought I would be able to come back to school. Honestly, high school was not my strong suit. (Andi, lines 177-183)

Andi came to the college because her fiancé suggested it. She never thought exposure to new ways of thinking and being encouraged to get involved would alter her view on life. Mark noted his experience.

My eyes have been opened, and I have changed, I had to pull up my socks. I look back on it now, and I think I've made the best decision in my life just because of the friends that I have made for life, the teachers that I have met, that have taught me a lot. I can't really say that I've sat here and had a dull moment. I haven't had a chance to be homesick so it was pretty good. I also bettered myself; my rodeo career, like it's quite phenomenal. (Mark, lines 268-282)

The high-quality people to help you out, the teachers who have spent hours and hours with, the preparing for the presentations till one in the morning. The dedicated teachers. Like, I don't know if you could go anywhere else and have

this. (Mark, lines 629-636)

Mark came to the college for a good time but learned if he wanted to stay in college, he would need to “pull up his socks.” The metaphor *pulls up his socks* was used as he experienced being on academic probation. Students were put on academic probation when their grade point average dropped below the grade of 2 or 50%. This experience of probation opened his eyes. It took courage on his part and the support from others to get him back up to speed and complete his work. Being on academic probation changed his outlook on his world. He saw life from a different perspective, was able to enjoy his success, and realize the feeling of what achievement. As well, Taylor noted his change.

I see things different now, being from the city I was never exposed to this. I kind of never had a pet before, so I come here and pet these lambs, and this stuff is really cool. This is a stress reliever after studying. Like after, I probably would say I was really happy, and one actually sat on my lap and went to sleep. It's pretty cool; I got to feed them milk too. I was emotional, just pure happiness. (Taylor, lines 115-127)



Figure 5.18 Taylor exposed to something different

Taylor spoke of his exposure to a different perspective and how his experiences assisted him in seeing the world from an altered viewpoint. Jack also noted his change.

I have seen myself change as I interact with others. The college offered us a lot to help, assisted us in feeling comfortable, but it was more personal for me.

Other people are more open, they were going all over the place, and it didn't seem to faze them. I think one of my problems was it was the first time for me being away from home. I guess I needed time to think and experience interacting with others. (Jack, lines 385-390)

Jack's worldview broadened when he came to the college. He realized how much he learned from this educational experience. I sensed his inexperience in traveling might have set him back in the beginning. Perhaps as he interacted with others, he realized the importance of engaging with others and how this could make a difference in his world. Alex also recognized what she gained from her academic experiences.

The faculty helped me look at my situation and figure out a solution that would work for me. They were super accommodating and welcomed me into the program. I felt the excitement in being able to choose my courses. I felt the faculty welcomed me and supported me throughout the program. (Alex, lines 82-90)

Alex was able to accept help from people she trusted and who supported her. Likewise, Holly was aware of others helping her grow and develop (Holly, lines 36-38).

Being exposed to multiple perspectives within a caring and friendly environment enabled participants to experience growth and become aware of the changes that were taking place in their lives. Not being affected by the power dynamics of competition within the learning environment, participants were able to experience changes in their behaviors.

5.3.3 Feeling supported, we altered our thoughts and actions.

Nine out of 10 participants felt supported in their quest to gain knowledge. Interactions between faculty and students were encouraged. Situations that nurtured and cultivated growth supported participants encouraging them to take risks in learning and reflect on their accomplishments. Tom spoke of his experience.

I got out of my safety zone and tried new things. It was a little awkward at first 'cause I'm not an outgoing person. In the beginning, it took a little while, but everybody got along good. I was chatting with everybody and got to know them

and do things with them, and then I started making new friends. (Tom, lines 73-82)

Tom was more comfortable staying in his dorm, but when he developed new friendships, his confidence assisted him in trying new experiences. Miko also acknowledged her ability to try new challenges.

I am not afraid to take on a challenge now. This was my biggest accomplishment as a student here at the college. I had the opportunity to go to the Alberta Deans of Business Case competition. In the first-year, I went as an observer. We got to watch and get dressed up and went out to supper. It was super fun, and I'm like, I really like this process, and I would like to do this. I got asked to be on the team in my second-year, and it was awesome. We became like a little family through our experiences and learned about ourselves and in the end won the competition. (Miko, lines 264-272)

Miko indicated she was no longer afraid of taking on a challenge. Her successful business case competition experience provided her with a newfound confidence and gave her courage to take on risks and learn. Likewise, Jade said she was astounded when she realized what she was able to do (Jade, lines 88-91). With the support of peers and faculty, she found the confidence to explore new activities. Andi identified her growth in confidence and self-worth (Andi, lines 181-183). Being exposed to different viewpoints within an encouraging and supportive environment helped participants grow in many ways. Alex noted:

I have confidence I never had. I am definitely more comfortable than when I first came.

It was awkward when you don't know a lot of people, and you don't know where you belong. I guess I compare this to when I first came, and I had those feelings. (Alex, lines 245-253)

Environments of care and support enhance learning and growth. Alex spoke of successful moments when she felt safe to explore and was encouraged to develop her skills while Larry indicated her motivation. She spoke of the supportive faculty and of how her peers supported her (Larry, lines 860-865). Jack also talked about his learning.

I know so many people, and I see the importance of thinking differently. My

experience has been good for me to learn and grow. This is what college is all about. When you are learning and meeting new people, you make lifetime friends. Learning is mainly what I now choose to take in. (Jack, lines 342-350)

Jack was the participant who had difficulties meeting new people. Encouraging individuals enabled him to reflect on his previous thoughts about the educational environment. Learning is a multi-dimensional experience. Participants engaged in reflection as they attempted to understand their experiences. Holly identified her change.

I can't believe it; I'm a different person. I'm happy, a really happy person. If I wasn't so tired you would see a lot more. Yeah, it was so good, and it changed my life. Really, from where I was, I used to work at a gas station, I swamped on trucks. You know long hours, little money, stressed all the time. It is just nice to have something you like, even if I don't get a job right away. I got a certificate. (Holly, lines 838-846)

Holly came to the college with the intent to learn but never imagined her possibilities.

She was open to learning new ideas and felt supported by caring and friendly faculty. These interactions made a difference in her achievement and her real success.

Participants' academic experiences exposed them to new perspectives which assisted them in viewing their world from a different vantage point. Feeling supported, participants engaged in new experiences. Because of the support, they were not afraid to reach out and request the help they needed. All participants identified they were exposed to new ideas. All participants except one noted because of their learning they saw the world from a different perspective while nine out of 10 participants indicated feeling supported. Participants who experienced belongingness and engaged in authentic learning opportunities were empowered and experienced change. Taylor developed the confidence to engage with animals. Jack's increased knowledge assisted him in accepting other viewpoints. Alex and Andi's increased self-esteem provided them with the confidence to interact with others.

5.4 Review of Findings

There are three key findings: first, participants need to feel they belong to the institution they are attending; second, participants want to live the learning; and third, when participants experience belonging and authentic learning, they encounter changes in their viewpoints. The main conclusions of this study answered the three research questions identified in chapter three. Two other conclusions were also discovered: research reveals new ideas, and enhancing student engagement may mean making changes to facilitate learning.

5.4.1 Belonging.

Participants identified the importance of belonging to their institution of study. Belonging was identified in different ways: feeling welcomed and cared about; feeling kinship within the academic community; and feeling an overall sense of belonging at the college.

Participants also acknowledged the support and care they received from support staff and faculty. These feelings contributed to participants feeling a sense of trust in the people at the institution. The faculty was regarded as mentors and friends who encouraged and supported rather than viewed as individuals in authority. Support staff engaged with students while peers were helpful and this created a sense of care. Students who felt they belonged were willing to take risks and participate in learning.



Figure 5.19 Jade's sense of belonging

5.4.2 Living the learning.

Participants identified the importance of hands-on experiences. Active learning aligns with the pedagogy noted to enhance adult education. As well, collaborating with peers lessened any power issues that normally come with competitive learning.

Teamwork was favored within the learning environment assisting students in feeling a sense of trust in their classmates. Living the learning, which has also been identified as authentic learning, assisted students in understanding difficult concepts and provided learning experiences that facilitated opportunities to transfer the skills learned. Real-world learning opportunities allowed the participants to physically construct meaning within the learning environment and feel the impact of that experience. Being actively involved in acquiring knowledge brings change.



Figure 5.20 Students Living the Learning

5.4.3 Changes in life views.

A compassionate learning environment where participants were able to engage in learning opportunities empowered them to try new activities. These experiences encouraged participants to explore and expand their knowledge which resulted in gaining confidence and positive self-esteem. Participants felt a sense of empowerment as they were encouraged to develop and grow. Academic divisions and club experiences also support growth and development.

As participants were encouraged to be active learners and reflect on their different learning experiences, they were able to identify the changes that they experienced. As they engaged with others, developed bonds of friendship, and sought to understand each other, they were able to explore and accept multiple viewpoints.

Participants were able to reflect on their engagements and noted how they felt a sense of fairness in their interactions with faculty, staff, and peers. Participants were able to recognize their areas of growth and development and identified how they had evolved in their thinking and skills. An encouraging, supportive, and trusting atmosphere facilitated authentic learning opportunities for participants to grow, develop, and change their perspectives. Learning happens at many levels. Interviewing the participants provided me the opportunity to understand more about the students who attended Prairie Site College.



Figure 5.21 Experiencing success

5.4.4 Revealing new ideas.

Listening to the students offered a new perspective to understanding the educational environment and presented a rare opportunity to understand the students' views of the academic experience. Participants' viewpoints on learning activities and campus life experiences at Prairie Site College were powerful examples of positive engagement.

The common themes solidified the importance of particular experiences. Divergences in themes were noted specifically in higher-level reflective activities. For example, some participants were able to describe what they experienced, others were able to recognize a change in their behavior, and a few were able to articulate the differences that had taken place in their thought processes. Learning was personalized, and when students were given opportunities, supported, and encouraged, their growth was not predictable. Taking the time to plan for student development then means thinking about creating opportunities for positive engagement.

5.4.5 Findings from different campuses.

Prairie Site College is considered a rural institution and, as noted in chapter one, has two different campuses. Campus A resides within a small town with a population of 5,400. Students who attend this campus are primarily living in the dorms, have the option to bring their horse to campus and are exposed to various club opportunities. Campus B is a city with a population of 30,000, and many of the students are living at home or in dwellings off campus. There are fewer club activities but more opportunities to join sports teams. Students are often perceived as more career-focused seeking white-collared jobs as opposed to blue-collared occupations on Campus A. Despite these fundamental differences between campuses, the same themes were found to emerge from the participants. Although I assumed the unique characteristics of each campus would produce different results, Prairie Site College learners want to experience belongingness and authentic learning in their learning experience.

5.4.6 Enhancing engagement, making changes.

Key findings emphasized students need to experience belongingness and authentic learning. The interconnectedness of these findings highlights the importance of cultivating a culture that is student-centered. Presenting these findings to our Senior Leadership Team led to the creation of a new position called Manager of Student Life which was a direct outcome of this study. Another positive change that directly related

to this research was how our team meetings focused on expanding the students' learning experiences and ensuring our decisions impacted learning in positive ways. The focus on the students' experience was regarded as an important key to improving retention rates.

In the next chapter, the findings will be discussed as they relate to extant literature. Key areas that will be focused on are belongingness, authentic learning, and transformational experiences.

Chapter 6

Discussion

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss in more detail what was revealed concerning student engagement at Prairie Site College and the relevance to literature. This discussion is organized around three dimensions: belongingness, authentic learning, and transformation. I conclude the chapter with a dialogue on the importance of leadership and student engagement.

My interpretative phenomenological analysis approach was creative in implementing photo-elicitation and semi-structured interviews. I could not predict the outcome of this study, nor could I imagine what each participant might express regarding their lived experiences at the college. Although each campus had a very different culture, what emerged was a similarity in the participants' stories. However, there was uniqueness in each narrative that provided an idiographic account of what was unique to their experience. Recent literature (Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 2012) argues that student life experiences do impact learners' overall academic success. I argue that students' positive lived experiences promote learner success and more.

The findings of this study recognized that students' lived experiences have far-reaching effects, and they are paralleled to Baumeister and Leary's (1995) theory of belongingness. The human need for belongingness provides the foundation to understand the participants' growth, development, and success.

6.2 There was a Sense of Belonging

Belongingness is the need to be and perception of being involved with others at differing interpersonal levels which contributes to one's sense of connectedness (being a part of, feeling accepted, and fitting in), and esteem (being cared about, valued and respected by others), while providing reciprocal acceptance, caring and valuing others. (Levett-Jones et al., 2007, p. 211)

Baumeister and Leary (1995) defined belongingness theory as a perspective to understand human needs and actions.

Specific to nursing education, Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2009) state within the learning environment, belongingness is a major factor for learners, and that staff who work with students influence their belongingness. Within the current study, belongingness includes the feeling of being cared about as well as connecting with and trusting others within the learning environment.

Kern et al. (2014) argues that belongingness is a fundamental element in creating a caring environment. Kavanaugh, Moro, Savage, and Mehendale (2006) suggest caring “focuses on the importance of being mindful of the needs and well-being” of others (p. 245). Caring for others has been identified significantly within the nursing field. Watson’s theory of care (2008) provides a holistic way of dealing with people. Margaret Jean Watson (1994) developed the theory of caring suggesting “caring is at the heart of nursing” (p. 3) while Lukose (2011) claims that holistic care enhances healing. Participants alluded to the sense of belongingness as they spoke of feelings of being cared about, connecting and trusting others within the learning environment.

Another perspective to belonging is noted in the work of Becher (1994), Neumann, Parry, and Becher (2002) and Woods (2007). This research focused on the different academic disciplines within higher education and their distinctive cultural characteristics. The work is traced back to Becher and Trowler (2001) who categorized higher learning academic disciplines as a tribe that would have particular values, beliefs, and cultural traditions. The knowledge domains of each academic discipline were identified as territories. Woods (2007) states within each discipline or tribe the learner takes on specific attitudes, ways of behaving and fitting into the discipline. The socialization of each discipline then shapes the learner’s thinking and delivers a particular type of learning experience. This discipline involvement can give the student a sense of belonging. I noted an attachment to academic disciplines from the jackets some of the participants wore. Their jackets were embroidered with “Aggies Class of 2015” (Agricultural Science) or “ELCC class of 2015” (Early Learning and Child Care). I also noted participant’s sense of belonging to the student-managed farm *unit* as they

spoke passionately about a particular team within the student-managed farm. Although the academic discipline was evident within some of the conversations, I found the theory of belongingness resonated more closely with the participant's descriptions of being cared about and connecting with others.

Within the current study, Mark identified how he felt supported in his overall success when others at the college cared about his feelings and welfare. For example, he identified how a staff member picked him up at the airport (a 2-hour journey) and identified the faculty member who loaned him household items until he could acquire his own. This situation could be unique to a rural institution. The college is small, and often staff and faculty will help out students when they have the opportunity. Similarly, Holly talked about the conversations she had with staff around campus and her tutoring sessions with faculty members at 6 o'clock in the morning. This is another characteristic that might be exceptional; however, in a small college, there is often faculty who will tutor students who require additional help. Tom shared how incredible his roommates were when he broke his arm. They got him food, carried his books to class, and set up the labs for him. Participants spoke of the college as a place where people cared about them. Faculty and staff were noted for their friendly and caring attitude towards each participant. They took the time to care and encourage students both in and outside of class.

Participants spoke about being welcomed and supported throughout their learning experiences. Larry spoke about how her presence in class was important to the faculty member and identified how the faculty member took the time to greet her before class and ask her about her day. When Larry inquired about club activities, this same faculty member gave her additional information. Also, this particular faculty member had teenage children the same age as Larry and often invited her to attend functions with the family. This is another example that highlights how instructors in a rural college setting may have more opportunities to engage with students where the average class size is 25 students to one instructor. At Prairie Site College students often travel great distances to attend and only return home once or twice a year. It is

not uncommon for staff and faculty members to include students in social and family functions.

Making connections is another important aspect to belongingness. Glass and Westmount (2014) argue that belongingness includes feeling connected, being supported, and finding positive interactions. According to the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2003-2018), when learners connect with others, their behavior often changes. Mark, in his interview, identified his change in attitude regarding academic achievements. He intended to come to the college *just to party*; however, this changed to his taking pride and ownership in his academic accomplishments. Connecting with others and experiencing the sense of care from others altered his viewpoint. Within the college's rural setting, Mark learned that he was not a number and people cared about his well-being.

According to the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2003-2018), making connections involves being committed to listen, respond, and interact with others. Similarly, Alex spoke of her special connection with the faculty who called her by name and took time to talk with her. She felt valued and recognized. Countryman and Zinck (2013) acknowledged the value to learners as they make connections and identified the importance of faculty being intentional and proactive in establishing interactions with students. In the current study, Miko spoke of her first day when staff waited at the college entrance to welcome all students. She indicated that someone was there to greet the students by his or her name before class started. On another occasion, Miko spoke of her experiences with the student advisor who made a significant difference in the way she felt about being at the college. Prairie Site College campuses are situated in two rural settings and this makes it easy to meet students throughout the day.

Making connections during the orientation experience supported Miko helping her to feel less awkward, more confident, and better equipped to be ready for the first day of class. Similarly, Miko, Jade, and Mark acknowledged that as soon as they entered the college, friendly people greeted them which made them feel connected and

welcomed. Networking within the academic environment is a major factor that contributes to student belongingness.

The sense of trust is an important aspect of belonging. According to Bredlau (2016), we “tend to distinguish our perception of the world from our relationships with other people,” and trust is generated in our interactions with other people (p. 1). Holly was a shy individual, but campus staff took time to interact with her, and she felt their care. They took time to converse with her when she arrived in the morning. As a result, she was able to engage in meaningful conversations. In a rural area, this feeling of trust transferred to other Prairie Site College settings making interactions with other individuals easier. For example, Tom came to the institution as a shy individual; he attended class and then returned to his dorm never venturing out to connect with others. The resident assistant would visit him and invite him to dorm dinners. These dorm unit dinners provided a way for him to begin interacting with others. Connections that are genuine help the individual to experience a sense of care, and then trust begins to unfold. Participants also noted that before they felt comfortable in reaching out to others, they needed to feel trust. Jade and Alex shared that when there was trust, learning was meaningful. According to Giles and Alderson (2008), there will be misunderstandings when there is a lack of trusting relationships between the student and instructor. Learners who experience trust feel a sense of connectedness, feel comfortable socializing, and gain more self-confidence (Kern et al., 2014). As such, Osterman (2000) argues until learners feel a sense of belonging, care, and trust, there will be no sense of academic community. The nature of Prairie Site College’s *rural-ness* might make it easier for students to feel care and trust as they have many opportunities to engage with faculty and staff outside class.

According to Bredlau (2016), as adults, our trust in others is either protected or damaged by relationships. Jack noted it took him more than three years to trust people. As an international student, he noted the cultural differences and how it took him time to understand the idioms associated with the Canadian culture which affected his sense of belonging and his opportunity to trust others. Baumeister and Leary (1995) emphasize

how social relationships impact our sense of belonging and impact our emotional and cognitive patterns. Within the current study, the features of care, connections, and trust contributed to participants' feelings of belonging.

6.3 The Experience Was Real

The emphasis in school and university has been about extracting essential principles, concepts, and facts, and teaching them in abstract and decontextualized form. The inadequacies of this approach abound in everyday experience, for example, the driver with a physics degree, attempting to dig the car out of the sand instead of partially deflating the tires. (Herrington & Oliver, 2000, p. 1)

According to Lombardi (2007), the authentic learning process tends to be more social-cognitive, similar to a workplace setting, where learners are “cultivating portable skills.” (p. 3). Learning in this way provides for knowledge acquisition through concrete activities. Students are provided with meaningful involvement that put them in contact with real-world situations helping them to focus on complex problems. Participants within this study indicated that for them to experience success they needed to be supported by college personnel, be positively engaged, and be exposed to multiple views in order to expand their knowledge.

Authentic learning is not a new concept. Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) identified authentic learning in the late 1980s, and Resnick (1987) sought to identify practical, real-world intelligence. In the 1990s, Lave and Wenger (1991) identified a model of a community of practice which involved groups of learners with mutual learning interests coming together to find ways to make learning more concrete. The theory of situated learning (Lave, 1991) suggests the importance of group learning. Herrington and Oliver (2000) state in order to create the authentic learning environment, educators should combine the knowledge of adult education and transformative learning theory.

Real-world learning is what participants in this research study described they wanted indicating the environment played a significant role in how they appreciated their academic experiences. These real-life activities promoted positive outcomes when

participants were supported. For example, Mark spoke of the student-managed farm experience. He talked about engaging with the community, making friends, and learning from others. He provided examples where the concrete learning opportunities at the institution prepared him for the work world. Being mentored by faculty prepared him for one of the largest farm sales in Canada; although this experience *puts the students on their toes*, this opportunity provided them with real-world learning. Mark spoke about how his team was ready to answer questions from industry professionals. They learned the process of what was involved to get animals ready, to be transported for a 6-hour journey, as well as the preparation work of bathing and grooming. As Mark reflected on this experience, he thought about what he had learned from the activity, how faculty supported and facilitated his learning, and how these experiences prepared him for his upcoming job. The *rural-ness* of Prairie Site College offers an environment that allows for the integration of the academic classroom within the farm setting. For Mark, this type of learning experience was the catalyst that changed his behavior. Mark was also accountable for his behavior. Within the small class, students had to rely on each other and be accountable to each other.

Participants spoke of the support they received from college personnel. According to Tinto (2012), educators should put in place a variety of tools to ensure students receive the support they need. This example was noted by Larry who spoke of the assistance her instructor provided her team when they did not understand a specific concept in class. Holly identified the instructor who physically walked with her through the lab to demonstrate the significance of high-pressure water flow.

Levett-Jones et al. (2009) suggest when faculty connects theory to practice through real-world activities it prepares students for the changing world. Jade specified the Agriculture Tour Club trips provided concrete experiences about farming in a third-world country. She was able to identify how these activities helped connect theory to learning. She also discussed receiving support from the faculty when she took on the responsibility of preparing for the trip by joining in on a fundraising event. Jade also indicated the importance of the faculty presence, their assistance, and how their

guidance supported theoretical connections. The rural nature of the college allows faculty to follow through with teaching concepts on field trips which might not be possible in a large urban center.

Engaging with others is identified as an important factor in authentic learning experiences (Zepke & Leach, 2010). Engagement is also identified in many different ways. Profiled within the current study is how educators related to their students. For example, Holly and Larry discussed forming meaningful relationships with faculty and community members. Holly spoke about how commissioning the lab provided that unique opportunity which assisted her in securing her first job. Larry spoke of her class activities within the community and how she observed her instructor interacting and providing real-life examples of how to network with potential clients. Larry identified feeling more assured and ready to attempt activities after experiencing the hands-on learning opportunities at the college. She gained confidence after attending Prairie Site College. The opportunity to cultivate social networks within the rural college environment provided participants a safe way to understand how to work with others. As mentioned earlier, students may have more opportunities to interact with other individuals within Prairie Site College's small rural experience. Participants often identified that they did not feel like they were a number at Prairie Site College. The *rural-ness* of the institution allows for designated common lunch periods. These opportunities encouraged students and staff to participate in events such as the chili cook-off. This was a competition where teams participated in making chili. The common lunch hour activities provided the venue for socializing and creating camaraderie.

According to Kuh (2001), how students are engaged in constructive, practical learning activities promotes understanding. This was noted in the current study when Holly spoke of tracing the pipes on a class diagram. However, it was not until she walked through the energy center lab and physically followed the pipes that she understood how the water moved through the system. As well, Taylor sat through many board meetings where scholarships were discussed. However, it was not until he

attended the President's Gala that he understood the significance of the scholarship program. Real-world learning assists the learner in transferring concrete experience to abstract drawing as indicated by Holly in her experience with understanding water flow.

According to Ma and Nickerson (2006), when students embrace the social and physical aspects of learning, they enjoy significant knowledge. In the current study participants noted their pride is in *living the learning*. They provided explicit examples of engaging in learning experiences and how they cherished these moments. Participants acknowledged engagement opportunities as hands-on learning, meaningful activities, and working with others to solve issues in team situations. They were able to articulate how their real-world activities promoted a better understanding of the concepts they were learning. Wawrzynski et al. (2012) acknowledged student engagement and achievement is recognized in higher education literature noting how students benefit from different college experiences. Similarly, Taylor noted a field trip experience and how much he learned from engaging with others while Miko spoke of being a member of the case competition. She discussed engaging with faculty and experiencing the Dean's passion in helping the team prepare for the competition. She spoke of the five-hour trip to get to the competition, the importance of conversations with classmates, and how this experience contributed to her knowledge. According to Strayhorn (2012), research confirms positive engagement is associated with learning and development. Miko and Taylor shared that engaging in academic activities provided them with the most memorable learning. Miko spoke of traveling together as a team with the Dean. This may be another example of Prairie Site College's rural advantage. The small nature of the institution means many college employees work together to ensure the learning experience is successful. The program Dean supported the students by travelling with them and the instructor to attend the case competition.

Strayhorn (2012) acknowledges positive learning experiences promote a variety of development including critical thinking and social responsibility. Lillyman and Bennett (2014) indicate the international student contributes to diversity by adding a fresh perspective and helping other students to reflect on their values. These interactions

increase tolerance, understanding, and appreciation for differences. Trice (2004) claims social capital is enhanced when there is a diverse student body and learners are exposed to knowledge from different cultures. Within this current study, Jade commented on how her academic field trips to two separate countries assisted her in understanding other agricultural procedures. She also noted the multiple perspectives on culture, food, and industry interactions and how these experiences both broadened her knowledge and provided opportunities that she had not previously considered. Morphew (2009) argues indoctrination is less likely to happen when the students' learning includes many different perspectives. Participants noted coming to the learning table and experiencing different social and historical perspectives fostered divergent thinking and enhanced their learning. For example, Jack spoke of his experience with guard dogs back home and his interactions with the therapy dog on campus. Mark identified learning from a Canadian perspective and appreciating the differences between his homeland and Canadian practices in animal handling. Miko spoke of her experiences and opportunities working with a group of diverse students from the students' association while Taylor identified his engagement with donors at the Gala increased his understanding of networking. Real-world experiences provide opportunities for learners to understand more about diversity within the world.

According to Mezirow (1991), adult learning means being reflective of different perspectives, learning from them through reflection, and shifting our thinking because of our reflective practices. Similarly, Tom identified how he came to the college with a Canadian agricultural perspective but after reflection could articulate his view was not a Canadian perspective but a family tradition. Likewise, Andi was able to reflect on her past academic experiences and understand her past actions. Being exposed to multiple perspectives allows the learner to understand the *situated* experience from different viewpoints. Engaging and collaborating with diverse perspectives exposes the learner to a variety of ways of knowing and perceiving the world. Different perspectives can be explored in many venues. However, the student's experience at Prairie Site College,

with its *rural touch*, may allow students more opportunities to connect and engage with a variety of individuals throughout the campus.

6.4 The Experience Transformed Them

Frames of references are the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences. We have a strong tendency to reject ideas that fail to fit our preconceptions, labeling these ideas as unworthy of consideration, aberrations, nonsense, irrelevant, weird or mistaken. Transformative learners move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience. (Mezirow, 1991, p. 5)

Transformational experiences identified by participants included feelings of empowerment and success, reflection periods, and some opportunities for self-actualization. According to Mezirow (2004) adult learning comes through understanding diverse perspectives that others bring, reflecting on personal values, and engaging critically which often requires a shift in one's original thinking. The ability to become critically aware and shift one's perspective will depend on the individual's social maturity (Moore, 2005). Transformational learning is not a new theory. Tennant (1993) described the "transformational perspective as a development shift (new worldview)" (p. 41). My belief suggests creating an environment that invites mature discussion, embraces diverse thought, and values differences will promote an atmosphere for transformational experiences to occur. The rural setting of Prairie Site College may provide an atmosphere and environment that allows students more opportunities to encounter differences and reflect on these situations.

A characteristic of adult learning is critical reflection which is an outcome of learners engaging with others (Merriam, 2004). Learning has shifted from a traditional concept of learning through rote or lecture to a student-centered paradigm that welcomes discussion and activities (Mezirow, 1991). Instead of memorizing facts for specific situations, learners will learn by communicating reflectively, so they can better understand what is known. I believe that adult learners are capable of critical reflection and able to engage in rational discourse although there may be various levels of

reflection. Learners will be influenced by their cultural and social forces and bring their perspectives to the learning environment. Many participants were able to acknowledge their transformational learning experiences. However, only some of them were able to reflect on their experiences critically and realize their mindset had shifted. Other participants identified they had changed and discussed some of the influences that impacted their changes.

Moore (2005) suggests learners take on an active role in transformational activities and use knowledge as a tool. If this type of learning is experienced, learners will be able to transfer what they have learned to solve future dilemmas. Such learning experiences require a shift in using what is known to predict what might be.

Transformational learning embraces a level of competency. Participants were able to display this as they spoke with passion about their feelings of empowerment and how the learning activities changed their perspectives. In fact, nine out of 10 participants recognized life changes because of their experiences at the college. An example is Tom's comment regarding becoming more confident in his interactions with others. After engaging in his first year and living with roommates in his second year, he was able to interact with people in ways he had never previously done. The hands-on learning provided skills that he had not understood in the abstract form. According to Taylor (2008) perspective transformation occurs when there is critical reflection and meaningful discussion. Kitchenham (2008) suggests

"Transformation occurs through critical self-reflection of assumptions that support the perspective in use. Learners, who are exposed to different ways of knowing, can take others' perspectives, analyze the context, think abstractly, and engage in critical self-reflection to experience perspective transformation" (p. 112).

When transformation occurs, individuals can experience empowerment, success, reflection, and possibly self-actualization.

A range of researchers (Kuh, 2001; Warren, 2002; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005; Merriam, 2001) have sought to pinpoint the essentials of creating a productive

academic learning environment to increase learner success. Both Pineda-Baez et al. (2014) and Hougaard (2013) argue that success is enhanced with positive student-faculty interactions and support for students. Participants in the current study confirmed this. For example, Holly spoke of her positive interactions with the faculty and how they spent extra time with her to help her understand abstract concepts and provide activities that enhanced her learning. As noted earlier the *rural-ness* of Prairie Site College may offer students more time with faculty.

Jafar (2016) indicates implementing educational practices that promote choice and engagement within a student-centered environment assist learners in creating real-world solutions. As well, faculty who facilitate and provide meaningful feedback to the learner enhance the students' critical thought processes. Jade spoke of her experiences of interacting with the other students and how much she learned from the students and faculty. According to Metoyer et al. (2014), providing learners with a student-centered environment promotes higher learning levels, interest, and attendance.

Severiens et al. (2015) argue that student-centered learning experiences invite engagement and cooperative learning which promotes positive results. Participants favored the student-centered approach. Miko spoke about engaging in sessions for a challenging class project and the importance of student discussion. Taylor identified the preparation for his presentation and how learning from other students enhanced this project. He spoke of critically considering each presentation and listening to others while reflecting on good presentations. He noted how he implemented portions of the presentations that he had observed. Participants who appeared deeply engaged seemed more interested in their learning outcomes.

According to Webber, Krylow, and Zhang (2013), the results from the 2008 American National Survey of Student Engagement found positive student perceptions of academic experiences were increased when the learner was highly engaged. Andi and Holly spoke of their accomplishments, hardly believing their success, noting how the assistance of faculty supported them as well as the importance of others who took the

time to care about their success. Success is not always identified in the same way. Participants were also able to reflect on their learning experiences. Miko spoke of her confidence and attitudinal change in her study habits (the way she was able to lead in class projects and take charge of issues in her role in the Students' Association). She indicated the college experience provided her with a new perspective in thinking about ways to give back to the society that she had never previously considered. According to Mezirow (1991), this act of critical reflection becomes an important aspect of adult learning. This reflective action was also noted by Andi as she spoke about how much confidence she had after her college experience. She talked about her club activities and Students' Association experiences, her leadership role, and her confidence in presenting, designing, and speaking in ways she never would have thought possible. She spoke of the scholarships she received and identified that before college, she did not feel capable of achieving high grades. Prairie Site College is small and has the opportunity to offer over 1.3 million dollars in scholarships to the students. The evidence within this study show how beneficial these awards have been to the participants.

Although Moore (2005) presents a critical view of how transformative education may be difficult to pursue within our current post-secondary system, Holly made it very clear that she was a different person since attending the college. Her life changed, and she was motivated to succeed. She noted her capacity to learn and identified goals and plans to further her education. Her outlook on life was altered, and she became more critically aware that the choices she was making contributed to her successful academic experiences. Similarly, Jade spoke of how learning changed her viewpoints and enhanced her academic success. She saw life differently and was motivated to learn all she could. Her newfound confidence, due in part to her peer's encouragement and her instructor's support, gave her the courage to open a musical show at the college.

According to Williams (2001), "people have a frame of reference for interpreting what they see, hear, and read and this frame of reference originates in how one is raised, the culture in which one lives, and what one has previously learned" (p. 28).

People's viewpoints are shaped by what is meaningful to them. Transformational learning provides the adult learner an opportunity to use reflection as a way to understand more about one's values, beliefs, and assumptions. Merriam (2004) identifies "the goal of transformational learning is independent thinking, identifying critical reflection and reflective discourse as a means to facilitate learning" (p. 61). Within the current study, I noted how some of the participants recognized what they had learned from specific experiences. For example, Miko reflected back on how her attitude about learning had changed since she first arrived at the college. She noted how her exposure to different viewpoints made her think about her perspective about the future. Similarly, Mark identified how his attitude about learning had changed. He highlighted how working with classmates within collaborative learning activities altered his viewpoint.

Although students identified themselves as a disciplinary community such as "Aggies class of 2015" (Agricultural Sciences) or "ELCC class of 2015" (Early Learning and Child Care) more students referred to Prairie Site College than their specific academic discipline.

Participants within this study made use of reflection as a way to understand and process their success and change. Mark identified how he changed as an individual. He experienced some "hard reality," but he indicated the "tough love" helped him get his life back on track. Moore (2005) suggests the need for more cooperative and collaborative learning opportunities to encourage more shared understanding of ways of knowing. Mark acknowledged the influence both his peers and the faculty had on his life. The chance to work collaboratively with other students assisted him in becoming more aware of his actions. Similarly, Alex spoke of her confidence to talk to people. She came to the college as a shy individual with little self-esteem. Her two years of experience at the college boosted her self-esteem and developed her confidence and skills to interact with people.

Moore (2005) states cooperative and collaborative learning experiences that are void of competition encourage the learner. Although she questions whether the post-

secondary system is ready for this type of learning environment, within the current study participants identified positive experiences that included supportive and collective learning experiences. When students worked together, their goals were met. As well, they identified activities focused on discussions. These collaborative approaches, along with self-reflection, were identified by some of the current participants as life-changing experiences.

Strayhorn (2012) argues that students within the post-secondary system go through the same stages as Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943) and when these needs are met, there are positive outcomes. His findings indicate that socialization matters to students. Socialization fosters belonging and motivates students to learn. Similarly, Alex recognized when she felt a sense of acceptance from peers, she also felt a sense of belonging thus enabling her to reflect on learning, realize her changes, and verbalize how her confidence and self-esteem was enhanced. Likewise, Jade was able to articulate that her educational journey led to a life-changing experience.

College experiences impact students' lives as they experience empowerment, success, and implement reflection (Strayhorn, 2012). Jade noted an example of this self-actualization experience. She identified coming to the college not knowing anyone and feeling like a "fish out of water" on orientation day. Jade felt she belonged as faculty and peers both welcomed her and assisted her in becoming involved in different learning opportunities. As she reflected on these experiences, she noted how her beliefs and values were altered.

When there is acceptance among the students, there is a sharing of worldviews, and this sharing increases personal awareness (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2010). The experiences noted as transformational from the participants emerged from a new way of knowing. These opportunities allowed them to experience empowerment, success, reflection, and a change in their lives.

6.5 Leadership and Student Engagement

Leithwood, Seashore, and Wahlstrom (2004) identified three important roles that a leader plays within an institution: setting the direction for the institution, developing its people, and supporting sustainable performance. I would also add that my leadership plays a significant role in ensuring the overall sustainability of the organization and will discuss how each one of these leadership roles impact the student's experience at Prairie Site College.

6.5.1 Setting direction for the institution.

In chapter one, my leadership style was identified as being both a servant and appreciative leader. Greenleaf's (2002) idea of the servant leader is someone who is always "searching (for), listening (to) and expecting" (p. 20) better options as well as ensuring "that other people's highest priority needs are being served" (p. 22). Stone, Russell, and Patterson (2003) noted that "servant leadership emphasizes appreciating, valuing, mentoring and empowering people" (p. 354). Furthermore, the qualities of the appreciative leader identified by Lewis, Medland, Malone, Murphy, Reno, and Vaccaro (2006) indicate the appreciative leader "sees strengths, engages people in the process and walks the talk" (p. 97). As a leader, I have done my best to emulate these qualities as I work alongside the people I serve. At my direction, we have defined each goal initiated by our Board to ensure that student engagement is a priority. I worked with staff, faculty, and administrators to create a culture where students were provided the best possible learning experiences. As I led, I was able to influence the college's direction to ensure that each academic department provided its students with real-life learning activities. In chapter five, the students' comments about living the learning provided an indicator that this goal was being fulfilled. As an educational leader, I am aware of the importance of student engagement and have set the direction and have influenced others to support the student experience.

6.5.2 Developing people.

Professional development is the venue for developing our people. For the past three years, our leadership team has made available \$790,000 yearly to ensure our people develop leadership skills and teaching practices. Although we have had a new faculty orientation workshop for the past ten years, in the last three years, we have concentrated on promoting a learning culture where the student experience was highlighted. We hired a learning coordinator to assist faculty in rethinking teaching in the classroom. At the faculty's request, classrooms were renovated which also included a flipped classroom. This classroom created a different type of atmosphere where tables could be reconfigured for group discussions, video screens were placed on three sides of the classroom for student interaction, and a class set of iPads was included for interactive activities. The overall ambience of this learning setting was completed with comfortable chairs, couches, greenery, and bulletin boards for students to display materials.

As a cohort, the executive team has also been involved in leadership development. Coaches were brought in to enhance individual planning sessions to align with our Board-driven goals of learner success, relevant programming and research, connectivity, and sustainability. As well, the senior leadership team was interested in supporting my findings and endorsed a new position to support student life on campus. Fielding (2006) argues leadership has a philosophical impact by identifying the significance of creating a "person-centered environment" (p. 310). I influenced the development of people and have assisted in supporting more student interactive experiences by encouraging our staff to engage in professional development.

6.5.3 Supporting sustainable performance.

"Performance measurement has become an integral part of the organizational landscape in both private and public sectors" (Davis, Ortiz, Euler, & Kuykendall, 2015, p. 470) and often I hear that what gets measured usually gets done. With increased accountability within our post-secondary sector, measuring performance was a

significant part of my leadership role. Furthermore, measuring our performance signals to our institution what is valued, provides justification for resource requests, promotes continuous improvement, and provides a way to track our trends. Although our Board sets the strategic goals, as a leader, I influenced our institution in the way these goals were internalized; I ensured that the goals were the people's aims and were developed in the best interest of our students. Ramazani and Jergeas (2015) state the effective leader influences people and evaluates performance. Prairie Site College has moved forward in creating a culture where students lead in their educational programs such as the student-managed farm. Measuring this goal provided the evidence that indicated our success with this objective. Furthermore, our comprehensive institutional plan was an expectation of our Alberta Government, and at Prairie Site College, this plan was our strategic document providing the details for the annual report. I was involved in the development of the document and ensured that the student experience was manifested within each of the four Board-driven goals. I saw my leadership as a way to facilitate student engagement by monitoring and adjusting our goals to ensure that our student experience was positive for both learners and our institution.

6.5.4 Ensuring the sustainability of the institution.

I again return to the comment made by Yorke and Thomas (2003) that student engagement at an institution is directly connected to the institution's positive retention. As a leader, I was evaluated on the success of the institution in relationship to its financial viability. Although there were some entrepreneurial activities at the college, without a large student body to ensure fully enrolled programs, Prairie Site College's sustainability would be at risk. As a leader, I was able to work with our leadership team to endorse the use of the CCSSE and put measures in place to evaluate our existing programs. As well, the extra resources added to our programs and student life at Prairie Site College. My role as a leader provided me with the opportunity to empower those around me to positively impact the student experience. Even through this study, the students have had impact and will ultimately affect the future of Prairie Site College.

6.6 Summary

Prairie Site College has fifteen years of accumulated data from its quantitative surveys. This quantifiable evidence has facilitated improvement within the college's environment for our students. The statistical rankings related to employability skills, graduate outcomes, and student satisfaction provided useful data that assisted us in making positive changes for the overall student body. To complement this existing data, my qualitative study provides evidence regarding the 'particular' student experience. As I listened to each story that participants expressed, I was able to better understand the passion of personal language, the richness of private expression, and the diversity of nuances that each participant shared about his/her educational experience at Prairie Site College. Participants described their experiences noting idiographic examples of what the college did for their development. Three dimensions emerged from the research data: there was a sense of belonging, the experience was real, and the experience transformed them.

The first dimension that emerged was there was a feeling of belonging. The theory of belongingness provides a theoretical perspective suggesting individuals need to feel cared about, feel connected, and experience trust. Participants gave examples of how the college's environment promoted belongingness identifying the institution as a place they could call home. They described the college environment as a place filled with people who cared about them. Feeling a sense of care led them to connect with others and build trusting relationships. They indicated that the learning environment at Prairie Site College created an atmosphere where connections were easily made. The college was recognized as an environment where people were friendly. Glass and Westmont (2014), as well as Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2009), identified when there is a feeling of connection; this helps the student to feel a part of the learning environment.

The second dimension—the experience was real—emerged from discussions regarding the participants' learning experiences. Authentic learning provided the theoretical perspective that resonated with how the participants described their educational experiences. These activities were identified as real-world learning

opportunities. Three aspects were identified under this dimension. The first aspect was student support which emphasized the importance of faculty connections and assistance. The second aspect was engagement, and this highlighted the importance of interacting with others. The third aspect was multiple perspectives identifying the importance of exposing students to a variety of viewpoints. This experience increased discussion and reflection leading to students changing their mindsets.

The third dimension—the experience transformed them—emerged from the participants' sense of belonging and the authentic learning activities they experienced. The atmosphere that participants described and the learning activities they identified created changes in their thinking. The aspects of empowerment, success, reflection, and self-actualization were features described as a direct result of the participants' experiences. Empowerment was noted in different ways. Participants indicated their success by reflecting on learning processes and how activities, as well as engagement with others, instigated changes to their perspectives.

Even though participants described transformational-like experiences, Moore (2005) claims transformational learning is complex, and there are individuals who may never be mature enough to change. I stress the potential for learners to develop within the college setting is too great not to embrace the aspects of transformational learning. I see adult learners as passionate, and where there are opportunities, educators should encourage learners. Not all students will experience self-actualization. However, it is profound when it is experienced. Empowerment, success, reflection, and self-actualization fit within the realm of transformational learning, and participants at the college experienced changes which resembled transformational learning. As well, participants at Prairie Site College reported their ability to embrace discussion, communicate, disagree, and reflect in mature ways.

Prairie Site College is a rural institution that offers its students a unique experience. The institution has two campuses, and both are *rural* in comparison to urban city institutions. This *rural-ness* may give the learner the opportunity to engage

with faculty and staff more frequently. The nature of the *live-the-learning* experiences may allow the students more experiences to interact with other students.

As an interpretative phenomenological analysis study, my goal was not to predict. Instead, I sought to understand more about what the students thought about being engaged. I learned that students need to feel belongingness before they will participate in meaningful learning. I found that when the participants felt a deep sense of belongingness at the college, their desire to engage in real-world learning experiences was fostered. I realized combining belongingness with deeply engaging learning experiences encouraged participants to critically think about their progress and their future.

The following diagram depicts the aspects related to the experiences participants identified. The far right column identifies the aspects related to each experience while the middle column identifies the experiences participants discussed. The far left column connects the experiences that participants identified to theory.

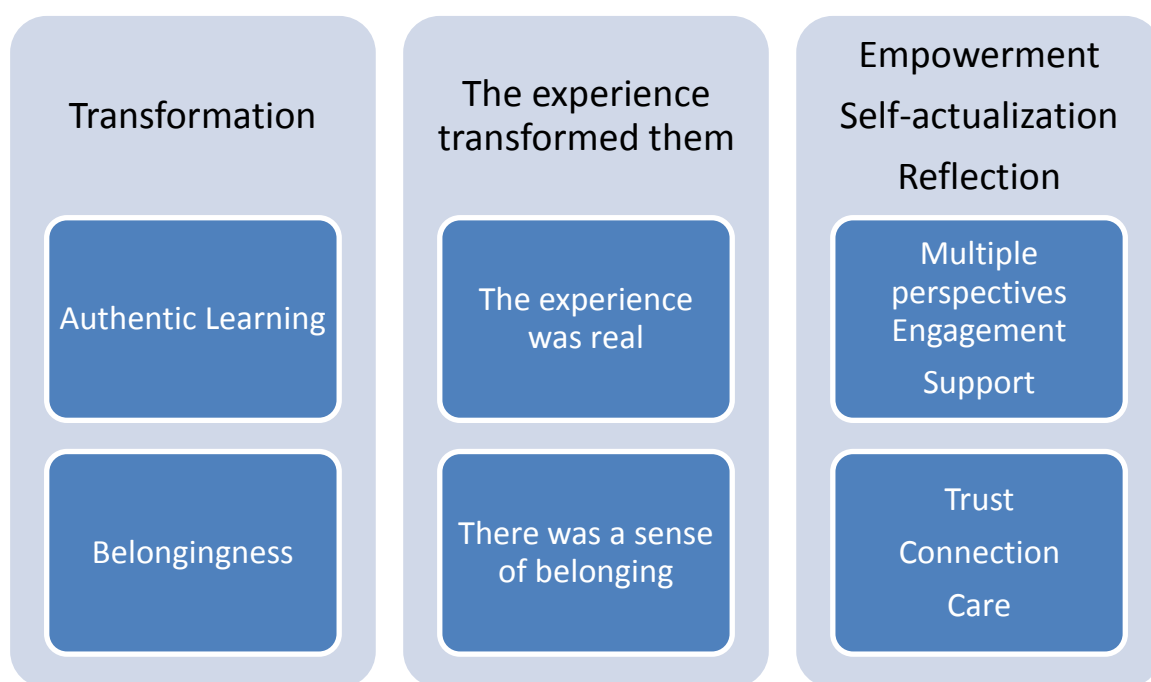


Figure 6.1 Connecting experiences to theory

Chapter 7 is the conclusion of this thesis. Chapter 7 will focus on the implications of this model for professional practice.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

Reflecting on my research study, I return to my original aim as identified in Chapter 1: to understand Prairie Site College students' lived experiences and to realize what is important to them. I have argued that this knowledge will assist me in creating positive experiences for students. As the president responsible for the institution's overall success, I work closely with the Senior Leadership Team to ensure our institution remains sustainable. The issue of student retention becomes a financially stabilizing factor for the college. Students have many choices when it comes to attending post-secondary programs in Alberta, Canada.

This chapter presents a post-secondary model for positive learning experiences by identifying its value and meaning to professional practice. I then reflect on my position as an insider researcher noting what I have learned throughout the study. Next, there is a discussion on using photographs to understand what engages students followed by a dialogue on appreciative inquiry, which is my theoretical framework, and how it guided me in implementing this study. The chapter concludes by identifying further research opportunities and the limitations of this study.

7.1 A Post-secondary Model for Positive Learning

Implementing photo-elicitation, appreciative inquiry, and interpretative phenomenological analysis produced a unique model for creating positive learning experiences in the post-secondary sector. This model presents a holistic approach to learning as it considers learning from the student's perspective. The model has three parts. The first part identifies what the student wants to experience within this environment; this is known as belongingness. Belongingness encompasses feeling a sense of care and trust, as well as being connected within the learning environment. The second part is what the institution can provide for the student, and that is providing educational environments that expose students to many different authentic learning activities. This environment includes providing support to students and creating diverse

learning opportunities allowing learners to be actively engaged with peers and faculty. The third part is the outcome of combining parts one and two. When students experience belongingness and authentic learning within the academic institution, there is a positive outcome. This perspective suggests learning outcomes will include some type of transformational learning such as empowerment, success, and self-actualization. Below is the model diagram.

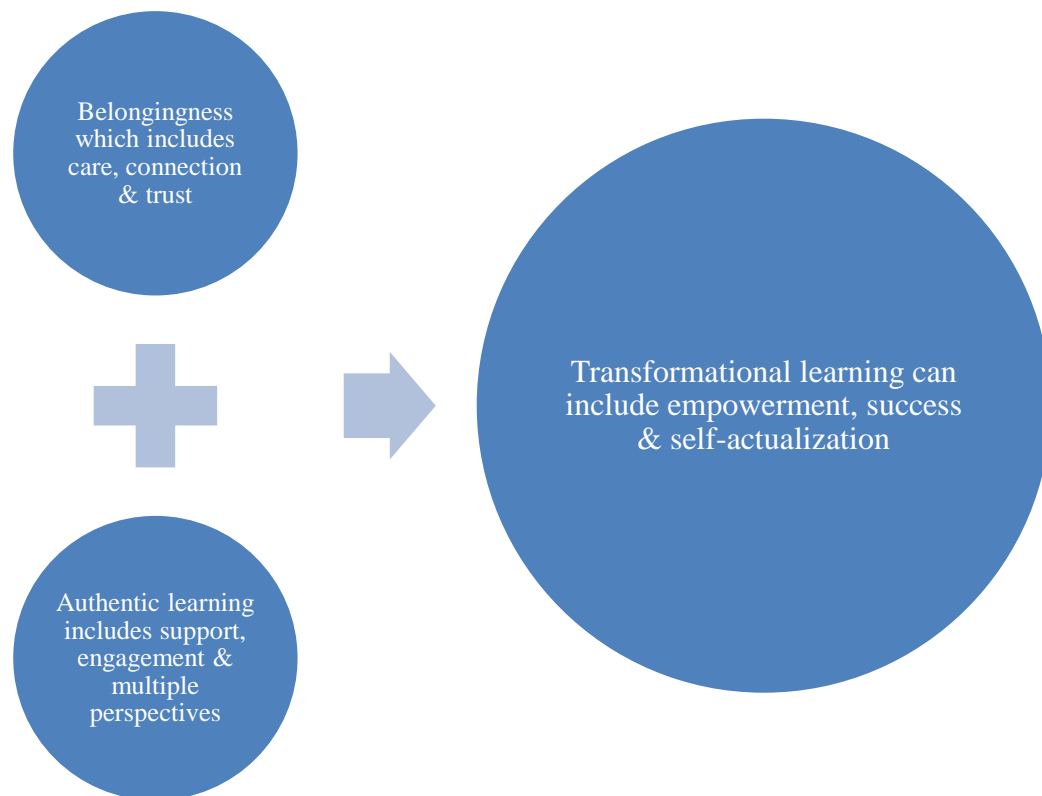


Figure 7.1 A holistic model for providing positive student experiences

Adult learners who attend post-secondary institutions may have more in common than we educators might think.

Through their personal stories the participants identified the importance of creating an educational setting that provides more than learning activities. In fact, participants compared Prairie Site College to their home. They wanted to experience

the *feeling of being at home*. I have identified this feeling as belongingness. Chapter 6 identifies the importance of belongingness and provides examples of what the participants described. Belongingness creates an atmosphere that accepts students, cares about students, makes an effort to reach out to students, and provides opportunities for students to make connections with others. When belongingness is experienced, students feel comfortable to learn.

Participants also indicated that they wanted to learn from real-world activities. Students who feel supported are provided with the necessary materials that assist them in their learning. Learners who engage with others are exposed to a variety of perspectives that increase their learning opportunities. Providing support and engagement within the learning environment ensures students are experiencing what I have identified as authentic learning.

Creating the atmosphere of belongingness and the environment of authentic learning provides a powerful combination that leads to students experiencing some change. This combination of experiences may result in feelings of empowerment, success, and possibly self-actualization. Thus, the model presented evidence that belongingness plus authentic learning may lead to transformational experiences.

As I indicated in Chapter 1, I sought to create a new understanding of existing issues. Belongingness and transformational learning have been explored since the 1990s. Authentic learning dates back further. There does not appear to be any discussion on combining these two theoretical perspectives. I began with the assumption that providing learners with engaging educational opportunities would result in positive consequences.

These findings add value to my professional practice. As a leader working in the post-secondary environment, it is important to understand student engagement. Educators who understand the significance of combining belongingness and authentic learning can take measures to create this type of atmosphere and learning environment. Students who engage in this type of learning experience are likely to find positive life-changing outcomes.

7.2 Value, Meaning, and Recommendations for Professional Practice

I envision the outcomes of this study to bring value in three areas of my professional practice. The three perspectives identified are Macro (institution), Meso (curriculum), and Micro (educators). A personal reflection notes how this study has or will impact Prairie Site College, and five recommendations are identified for post-secondary educators.

7.2.1 The macro perspective.

From the institutional level—the macro perspective—developing a new learning culture, was an outcome of this research. This study identified the importance of creating a learning culture (O'Banion, 1997) which includes more than just generating academic activities. The learning culture is saturated with active or authentic learning experiences (Reeves, 2006) to ensure that multiple perspectives and different ways of learning can be explored (Lombardi, 2007). Within this environment it is also important to create the atmosphere of belongingness (Levett-Jones & Lathlean, 2009). In fact, Baumeister and Leary (1995) put forward the theory that individuals who feel that they belong will experience a healthy sense of well-being which sets the tone for positive learning outcomes.

A new mission, vision and values were created through a grassroots approach to build a culture of belongingness and authentic learning experiences for students. Additionally, to support our new culture, our Vision 2030 and our comprehensive institutional plan highlights the following learner success goals:

- *Prairie Site College is a leader in providing a safe and welcoming learning environment for every student.*
- *Prairie Site College has a culture of belongingness, engagement, and innovation.*
- *Every learner has access to a full range of supports, and Prairie Site College is a partner in academic success.*
- *Prairie Site College fosters lifelong learning, leadership, and innovation.*

To emphasize the new learning culture the term *every learner* has been identified to accentuate the importance of belongingness within our institution. Furthermore, in support of these goals the senior leadership team has created a fund to continually improve our new learning culture.

7.2.2 The meso perspective.

From the curriculum level—the meso perspective—the learner-centred teaching environment suggests that a learner-centered experience is necessary in order to experience positive outcomes (Lombardi, 2007). Faculty has a major impact on student success (O'Meara, Knudsen, & Jones, 2013). It was noted that faculty who implement appropriate pedagogical practices (Collins et al. 1991) often teach from a constructivist approach (Grabinger & Dunlap, 1995) to ensure the curriculum presented is understood from the students' different learning perspectives. According to Mezirow (1991) and Merriam (2004), faculty who embrace pedagogical practices that resonate with transformational learning can promote life-changing experiences for the learner.

As a leader, creating a learner-centred teaching environment within each school at Prairie Site College was important. To encourage changes within our current curriculum we aligned our key performance indicators to each of our strategic goals. *Learner success* is one of these goals. As part of our inclusive practices key performance indicators are vetted through each school and a student-led experience is has been identified as significant to changing current curriculum. Prairie Site College student-led activities provide authentic learning activities that enhance meaningful real world experiences.

Another positive curriculum change was to establish a community of practice (Wenger & Lave, 1991). This type of group learning provides another avenue for learners to engage in meaningful dialogue on relevant topics. As well, our faculty can apply to an innovation fund that was developed to support faculty in implementing new ways of presenting curriculum.

The Agricultural and Human Services schools have led the way in transforming existing curriculum to a learner-centred teaching environment. This has provided other faculty the opportunity to observe how the students embrace this type of curriculum experience.

7.2.3 The micro perspective.

From the individual level—micro perspective—staff development is encouraged to support new practices. Prairie Site College's new philosophical culture supports the development of the individual in a holistic manner. Individuals are encouraged to create yearly workplans to include a section for personal development. Our robust professional development fund (\$800,000) allows each individual to access support in fulfilling their approved development plan. In addition, we have been strategic with our new faculty orientation training to promote a learning culture philosophy. Faculty who complete the new orientation training have access to a yearlong mentoring process. As a faculty member is introduced to different pedagogical perspectives, his or hers practices may change to incorporate these new philosophical ideas. I see the need to promote learner success by encouraging individuals to embrace our new learning culture and implement curriculum that enhances learner-centred teaching experiences.

From an individual perspective this research study has provided me with new theoretical ideas that have transformed my current practices. For example, as a practitioner-researcher, I have increased knowledge about conducting research and feel more at ease with this process. From a pedagogical viewpoint Mezirow's (1991) and Merriam's (2004) transformational learning philosophy provided me with a new perception on reflective learning. As I think of how I was able to combine existing theories to develop my current model I have become more aware of how an individual, when exposed to cognitively enriched practical experiences, becomes more self-reflective. I've also experienced how engagement in collaborative and cooperative learning experiences promotes tolerance and equality.

Personally, I have more confidence in conducting research, and realize the impact of using evidence to support my work. Having this research opportunity has increased my self-assurance when I presented at the 2017 National Colleges and Institutes Canada conference.

7.2.4 Recommendations for professional practice.

- Educators within higher education should develop a learning culture within their organizations and create the atmosphere of belongingness for learners.
- Faculty of higher education should ensure that learners are welcomed and treated in a caring and respectful manner.
- Faculty of higher education should develop learning environments that invite diverse thinking to expose students to a variety of perspectives.
- Faculty of higher education should create a learning atmosphere that builds on the learner's success.

7.3 The Strengths of Adopting an Insider Approach

The focus of this study was to understand how students made sense of being engaged from the perspective of an insider researcher. As an instrument of this study, I was able to draw on two decades of experience when thinking about what matters to students thus giving me depth and breadth of understanding about the traditional aspects of the college and its students. I am acutely aware this strength-based research can create limitations. Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009), cautioned how biases and preconceptions might influence understanding if the researcher does not pause to consider personal influences. It was a dual role that I played gathering data as a researcher yet being passionately involved with the institution as a leader. Through practicing reflexivity (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), I was careful to ensure what data meant and not what I thought the college wanted it to mean. I took an open and authentic approach to research and felt the participants were comfortable enough to be genuine in the stories they told me.

One of the strengths of this research was that in my role as a senior leader, I was able to access the institution and participants. This also provided challenges as a researcher in getting in touch with participants. I was conscious of the power dynamics inherent in my role as a leader. Although all levels of the organization were aware of my research, no one involved knew who the participants were. I did not influence the participants' academic success. At the onset of this study, I emphasized my role as president and took every precautionary measure to overcome any authority associated with the role as highlighted in Chapter 4.

Another valuable aspect of the insider approach was the support from the college's Board of Governors and the Senior Leadership Team. Both groups were progressive in their attention to our financial situation and were sensitive to the vital role student's play in the institution. The college's Board of Governors and the Senior Leadership Team supported the research and were curious about the outcomes. At leadership meetings, the team was updated on my findings. This resulted in the creation of a new position to support student life on campus. As well, the results of this study informed the decision to seek to develop a better environment for employees. We also employed a college-wide activity that promoted employee engagement, undertaking the Gallup survey (Rath & Conchie, 2008). The entire leadership team embraced the process. Although each leader had their style of engagement, we provided the Gallup (Rath & Conchie, 2008) toolkit to help facilitate engagement sessions.

Hellawell (2006) argues there are pros and cons to researching within one's institution by taking on a dual position of working in the environment and being a researcher. The researcher can be influenced by the organizational context which may "colour" opinions. However, the positive aspect remains that the insider researcher has a greater knowledge of the institution, its history, and context. My history with the institution may have contributed to a better understanding of what the participants were expressing. I was acutely aware of the potential for jeopardy in this position and consistently attempted to reduce my bias. I stated my position at the onset of the

research which was noted in previous chapters. I made use of Hellawell's (2006) suggestion to acknowledge bias and took every measure to reduce the impact. I did this by using reflection, keeping field notes, and sharing my findings with others. I was aware that implementing an interpretative paradigm with an insider's research perspective could carry personal bias and attempted to understand these prejudices. I was cautious in gathering data, conducting the interviews, doing the analysis, and formulating the conclusions.

Even so, I am deeply aware that my bias was present in the results because I was part of the research (Koch, 2006). I was conscious of my leadership role as president of the institution so I did what I could to equalize the power dynamic between the participants and myself. I ensured there was no impact or perception of influence on the progress of any of the participants within the institution. I regularly consulted with my supervisor and critical friend (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009) to better understand my thoughts and perceptions as to how they might affect the research results.

7.4 What I Learned Through This Research Process

My learning journey was not always an easy activity. As a college employee, I was a high-level visionary and not accustomed to getting into the details. A vital part of the research process was being organized and documenting the details. Koch (2006) stressed the importance of focusing on the details and identifying each decision. Not only did this create a systematic rhythm to the process, it also brought credibility to my project. To illustrate this thought, I shared my transcription route of manually transcribing with the intention that I would "intimately know" the words from each participant. As a professional, I saw myself being structured but organizing research components was different. I attempted to take a methodical approach by implementing Smith et al.'s (2009) techniques. The process included transcribing, reading, finding words to represent what I read, and tapping into my memory to assist with my reflections of what I thought I had heard and understood. I learned that theory provides

a valuable tool to examine and explain what I did. I learned to be a practitioner-researcher.

7.5 Applying Photo-Elicitation

The technique of photo-elicitation provided clarity in understanding, gave depth to the conversations I had with each participant, and allowed each participant to be creative. Photographs made it easier to follow the participant's story. Mark presented one photograph that stood out. I noted the expression on his face as he picked up the picture. Mark's voice became lower as he acknowledged the support he received, the care he felt, and the friendships he cultivated. None of these elements were apparent in the photo; however, while he spoke his voice and facial expressions revealed far richer meanings.



Figure 7.2 Mark's Prairie Site College experience

The photographs were an extension of the participants' explanations. For example, Holly picked up her photograph of a diagram. She explained what the diagram was and paused before she continued with a discussion of her frustration of not understanding the concept related to the chart. Before Holly set the picture down, her expression turned from perplexity to confidence as she identified her understanding. Although the photograph initially brought back feelings of her inadequacy, by waiting

and listening, I was able to hear her express a sense of triumph as she identified how she had been able to master the concept.

A few of the participants took the opportunity to create a “situated” scene. The photograph was created as a still life picture. For example, Alex created photographs that highlighted specific moments. When she referred to each photo, she identified her experience and what it meant to her. Each photograph seemed a work of art rather than a photo that was taken in an impromptu moment. As she spoke about each picture, her creations came to life; I felt her confidence as she proudly told her story.



Figure 7.3 Alex's photo creation

7.6 Appreciative Inquiry

Implementing appreciative inquiry as a theoretical framework resonated with my values and beliefs and incorporated a strength-based approach to dealing with issues. For the past two years focusing on the positive has been the hallmark of Prairie Site College's strategic planning process. It seemed natural to implement appreciative inquiry.

I value the idea of aligning strengths to ensure weakness become irrelevant, and appreciative inquiry provided this lens. Appreciative inquiry is a process that continues to focus on the affirmative and seeks out what is possible (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012). Appreciative inquiry challenges the status quo and provides a positive process to making a change.

I continue to learn the value of focusing on the positive, and in implementing this appreciative inquiry process I found it brought a new outcome to a long-standing issue. Focusing on the positive with each participant, I noticed how energized the conversations were. Participant excitement in telling their positive stories, recalling and reliving what they discovered in their educational journeys, will continue to ignite my passion for developing a better place for students and employees.

This research study was another opportunity to implement appreciative inquiry, and this process again illustrated why I found this approach the best avenue to understand issues at our institution. I will continue to implement appreciative inquiry. The energy that was created far outweighs the criticisms that appreciative inquiry critics identify. I discussed these criticisms in Chapter 3. When the emphasis is on the positive, the discovering process removes the negative and uncovers what can be, and this will promote excitement. For example, I was speaking to a group of students and framed a positive question to a negative issue, and together we discovered new positive solutions to a potentially explosive matter.

I implemented four phases of appreciative inquiry in the following manner. The dream phase for me was to close the gap in the literature concerning understanding post-secondary rural students' engagement. I hoped to improve our students' learning experiences at the college.

The discovery phase encompassed the methods I used as the instrument of this research. I took on the key concepts of appreciative inquiry to improve myself as a research instrument desiring to make a better learning environment for our students.

The design phase was the procedure I developed in which highlighted the process I took to understand how the Prairie Site College participants understood their engagement experiences at the college.

The final phase of the appreciative inquiry process was destiny. The destiny phase for me was my findings.

7.7 Recommendations for Further Research

This research study provided valuable findings regarding student engagement at Prairie Site College. Furthermore, it contributes to the current discourse by adding a phenomenological perspective to what is already known about this area. In Chapter Two I referred to the abundance of quantitative data that provides educators multiple ways to encourage student engagement. The research indicated that students want to experience a sense of belonging, be supported, engage in real-world activities and interact with faculty and students within their learning environment. I was interested in listening to the students about their lived experiences. The qualitative data in this study provided a unique perspective about enhancing the student experience. I was also informed about the learning environments that resonated with the participants and gained a greater understanding of theoretical practices that supported such learning experiences. Thinking about further research, a survey based on the findings of this study could include a larger sample making the findings more generalizable.

I focused on graduating students because I felt their experiences provided a better overall review of the college activities. In the future a longitudinal study using my research findings regarding belongingness and authentic learning could be incorporated into our annual graduate follow-up survey. In the present study I learned how individuals felt about being engaged within the learning environment. A longitudinal study would provide the institution with more comprehensive results and compare changes within the learning environment over a longer period of time.

Additionally, for further research the following questions could be used with the intent to generate more data to understand how different focus groups embrace student engagement.

- For example, for the Aboriginal learner **what elements are necessary for you to feel engaged in the learning environment?**
- For the International student **what are the factors you need to have provided to ensure your learning experience is meaningful?**

- For the part-time learner **what components are significant in having you become engaged in the learning environment?**
- For the online learner **what type of learning experience encourages your engagement?**

7.8 Increasing My Knowledge as a Practitioner-Researcher

I have become more mindful of how I can integrate theories into practice to complement learning at the college.

For example implementing communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) provides an avenue to expand our learners' horizons. Communities of practice provide an intentional way to expose learners to different perspectives. Implementing the theory of belongingness can complement transformative theory by promoting more sensitive learning activities. For example, connecting the students' stories on belonging with the theory of belongingness and its relevance to education may influence our faculty and staff to create more atmospheres of belongingness. This may promote more sensitivity within the learning sector. Implementing more diverse experiences within the college setting can encourage our employees to be more sensitive to our learners' needs as they encounter different ways of thinking and knowing.

7.9 Deepening My Understanding

I have become more mindful in reflection by taking time to reconsider my thoughts and making notes. It is easy to get caught up in writing and forget not to ensure the content has meaning to others. For example, in a Skype meeting, my supervisor posed some questions about my writing. I thought the answers were apparent. However, when I re-read my own words, I realized I could have been much clearer.

I value reflection as in thinking on, in, and through processes. This research process has brought to my attention the importance of being thoughtful as opposed to hurrying through a process to get it done. I note the importance of creating systematic

processes to make it easier for others to understand the road I have taken and articulating for others the details that I might assume. As a leader, it is tempting to push through processes and get the job done.

This study highlighted the importance of being mindful, taking time to think about what is, and being sensitive to the many perspectives that encompass what is. I tend to get things done, and this study taught me the value of rereading, rewriting, and then doing it again to clarify and ensure the details are noted. Deliberation in the research process brought clarity, better understanding, and more confidence in what I came to know.

7.10 Limitations

There are limitations to my research study that include the methodology I used, the nature of the site studied, and the research findings.

7.10.1 Limitations of the methodology implemented.

Idiography might not always be apparent in an interpretative phenomenological analysis study. For example, Wagstaff et al. (2014) struggled to apply idiography in their interpretative phenomenological analysis study. Although they agreed that an interpretative phenomenological analysis study uses small numbers of participants to create rich interpreted accounts, they struggle with finding a specific voice and found it difficult to understand how themes reflect both the group and the individual. However, Smith (2011) argued that single comments can be and should be made, and good interpretative phenomenological analysis research work should include both “the divergence and convergence” of the study (p. 10). Nevertheless, Smith (2010) identified that highlighting the particular was essential to the research process. I also was able to highlight idiography by zeroing in on the participants’ specific dialogue, and these verbatim quotes illustrated how the themes emerged. Although I understand Wagstaff et al.’s (2014) concerns, I did not feel these limitations impacted the goals of my research.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis has been considered prescriptive by Giorgi (1997) in that the method offers *suggestions* for the analysis process. However, Smith (2010) contends the techniques suggested within the interpretative phenomenological analysis research are not equivalent to “*prescribed procedures*”, and furthermore, guidelines are no guarantee of good research (p. 188). While researchers will adhere to procedures, every researcher will have distinct ideas that will influence both the process and outcome.

I agree with Smith (2010) and would suggest that following the interpretative phenomenological analysis suggested guidelines is not prescriptive. Furthermore, doing research requires an interpretative focus and highlights the researcher’s individuality regardless of suggested guidelines.

Brocki and Wearden (2006) argue an interpretative phenomenological analysis study is “inevitably subjective suggesting that no two analysts, even working with the same data, are likely to come up with exactly the same results” (p. 98). I argue that all qualitative research is subjective. While some theorists contend that interpretative phenomenological analysis has shortfalls, I appreciated how it helped me get close to the experience being studied. I would also agree with Pettit’s (2012) opinion that ontological roots are with Heidegger indicating “we are always interpreting and engaging with the environment around us” (p. 132). Thereby I am unconcerned with Chamberlain’s (2011) claim that interpretative phenomenological analysis needs clearer ties with phenomenology.

Although arguments are indicating a concern with the interpretative phenomenological analysis focus on the particular and interpretations, I feel the accounts given by the participants within my study were idiographic but also represented the group. I maintain that interpretative phenomenological analysis is still relatively new, and as the practice expands into more fields and as more studies implement the interpretative phenomenological analysis process, the model will continually improve.

If I was to embark on another interpretative phenomenological analysis research project, I identify two areas that I would change. I would change how the analysis charts were created as well as the transcription process. I would learn how to Line Number the analysis charts using the computer, and I would use an agency to type the original transcripts. At the onset of this research study, I had limited knowledge of the computer and was unaware of how to Line Number. Although my initial reason for manual transcription was *intimate understanding*, I wonder if it would have made a significant difference. I have spent many hours reading through each transcript, creating analysis charts, and rereading each several times. Transcription is a time-consuming exercise requiring many hours of listening. I discussed using an agency with my professional network of researchers, and they noted it did not make a difference to their overall research outcomes.

7.10.2 Limitations of the nature of the site.

The institution is situated in rural north-east Alberta and seems to attract a particular type of learner. The college has two distinct campuses: one more uniquely urban and the other resembling a small country town. The urban campus appeals to students who are interested in transferring to a university or who want to work in business, the energy sector, or in healthcare settings. The small-town campus attracts students who are interested in agriculture, environmental sciences, emergency services training, university transfer, interior design, trades, and human services. Both campuses provide dorms, and all the participants I interviewed lived in the dorms. It is possible that commuter students may have a different perspective of their lived experiences. It is also possible that students who attend this type of institution are seeking different qualities in their educational experiences.

7.10.3 Limitations of being an insider researcher.

The results of this research are my interpretations and relate to specific participants and a specific institution. I intentionally chose full-time graduating students. It is possible that when interviewing different students, such as part-time or online

students, the findings may have been different. The two selection methods I chose focused on a specific group of students. To find more of those types of students, I narrowed the pool of participants further. My results might have been altered if I had implemented a different selection process.

In qualitative research, each researcher's focus could be different. The choice of theories I worked from may have limited what I was able to see. However, choosing a different theoretical approach may have also changed my perspective thus changing the results of this research.

This study may have produced different results with a different researcher. My interpretations are unique to my thoughts and experiences. Investigating student engagement and combining the concepts of belongingness and authentic learning through a different lens, I have been able to contribute to knowledge. As Sam McKnight (2016) expressed "a twist on a classic, a reinvention, making the old new again, is what it means to be creative" (p. 76). Listening to each participant, I selected themes that evolved into a model which is informed by theory. The components of the model are not new, yet the positioning of each theme, the perspective, and the interpretations are mine and have produced something unique. I have also learned that the conclusions from my research are likely to be of interest to others. At the time of writing, I have spoken about my findings to the president of Colleges and Institutes Canada (CICan) and presented my findings at the 2017 Colleges and Institutes Canada conference. I will also share my findings through peer-reviewed journal papers.

7.11 Summary

As the president of the college, I work in close collaboration with the Senior Leadership Team to ensure our institution remains sustainable. Students are the heartbeat of the institution. Understanding what they want assists in creating positive learning experiences. As such, my question posed was "How do students, who have engaged with learning opportunities at Prairie Site College, make sense of being engaged in these experiences?"

Implementing Appreciative Inquiry as a theoretical framework, I created a holistic model for post-secondary learning. The model was illuminated through themes that emerged from an interpretative phenomenological analysis. Applying the technique of photo-elicitation was creative and provided me visual insights into what participants viewed as positive experiences.

It is this holistic model for positive post-secondary experiences that I contribute to the professional academic world. My findings emphasized that successful learning environments be cultivated in an atmosphere of belongingness. Belongingness within the authentic learning environment promotes personal transformative experiences. Although literature echoes similar perspectives, each theorist focused more on their area of specialty. I see the student experience as a package--a holistic model that encompasses belongingness and authentic learning. When this happens, it creates a climate where transformative experiences can be realized. Ma (2003) argued that successful student learning is dependent on feelings of belonging. Strayhorn (2012) and Tinto (2012) identified the importance of feeling engaged and being involved in the academic environment as it enhances the overall learning experience. Other theorists (Kuh, 2001; Levett-Jones et al., 2008; Osterman, 2000) also identify the importance of belongingness and how meaningful learning activities contribute effectively to the learner's development.

This study was undertaken from an insider researcher approach. I set out to identify the areas that could influence or hinder my study making every effort to mitigate each issue. I needed to be sensitive to the research process, gain access through appropriate manners, and display the role of a researcher as opposed to a senior leader throughout the research process.

I learned to be more mindful in reading, writing, and undertaking the research process; I became better at reflecting from different perspectives rather than focusing on one aspect. This research activity assisted me in becoming more aware of my ways of approaching an activity and the way I go about responding. I have increased my

knowledge of theory and gained a greater appreciation for how theory can be an influencer and enhancer in learning.

Although I am excited about the results of this study, I am not naïve in realizing the results are limited by the method, the group size, and my predispositions. As an all-encompassing project, this process increased my awareness, deepened my understanding, and developed and enhanced my skills as both a learner and leader.

Through this research journey, I have come to appreciate the role and value of good theory.

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Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet



1. Title of Study: Exploring belongingness at a rural college in Northern Alberta

2. Version Ten- February 2015

3. You are being invited to participate in this research study:

Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask me if you would like more information or if there is anything that you do not understand. Please also feel free to discuss this with your friends, relatives if you wish. I would like to stress that you do not have to accept this invitation and should only agree to take part if you want to. Thank you for reading this.

4. What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of this study is to hear what students have to say, understand what they think and use this new information to create a better 'learning atmosphere and environment'. A large portion of our students come to us from referrals. Listening to our students and understanding their experiences at the institution will provide me with first-hand information. Learning what the students think will help me to discover new opportunities for the college. Understanding the student's perspective, I hope to gain insight into what experiences are meaningful to young adults. Understanding how our students envision experiences, I hope to examine our current environment and atmosphere. Understanding what motivates students to learn may provide insights into ways of serving our students better, helping them to feel apart of their college campus.

5. Why have you been invited to take part in this study?

As a student who has experienced our learning environment, your comments provide valuable feedback. As a leader, I am interested in finding out how you think about the social and academic experiences at the college. My role is removed from your school and the classroom. Although I am president of Prairie Site College, my position has no direct personal influence on your attendance at Prairie Site College. There is no conflict of interest, and the research is confidential. The use of pseudonyms will protect all students; if any data are compromising identities will be omitted. Being involved in this study will not have any impact on your current stats as a student. You have been invited because you attend Prairie Site College. I will be talking with eight to ten students from the six different schools and the two different campuses. I

am interested in hearing from a diverse group of students who are attending the college to understand more about their college experiences

6. Do I have to take part?

No, you are invited to take part in this study. However, your participation is voluntary.

7. What will happen if I take part?

The participant (You) -will be requested to take pictures which represent your experiences at the college. I am interested in understanding more about the places and atmospheres which resonate with as a student, understanding more about what learning experiences provide meaning for you. Please refrain from taking pictures in places where an individual student would expect a reasonable amount of privacy, i.e., classroom and washrooms. Please refrain from taking pictures of people's faces or any distinctive clothing which make it easy to identify.

The Researcher (Me)- I will have a pre-meeting with you to discuss the process. Our second meeting is where we will chat about the pictures you have taken, and I will ask you some questions. I will record our conversation on my iPhone. Recording the conversation will provide me the opportunity to review what we talked about and write down what has been said.

The Participant (You)-At any time you feel discomfort or have explained something you do not want to be recorded, the voice recording will be turned off.

How long will the interview last? 45-50 minutes (I will be requesting you to take pictures of experiences, activities, environments, and atmospheres which are meaningful to you. At our second meeting, I would like you to explain how each picture relates to your academic and social college experience. I would like a copy of each picture for my report.

Where will this conversation take place? I will be booking a room which allows us the opportunity to have a quiet conversation with no distractions. There are a couple of possible locations, the meeting room off the cafeteria or a classroom.

The Participants (Your responsibilities) – I will provide you a disposable camera to take 1-15 pictures. You will return the camera to me; I will get it processed and then we will meet and talk about the pictures you have taken. I am requesting you to take pictures of your experiences, activities, environments, and atmospheres which are meaningful to you as a student learning. Please refrain from taking any pictures which would identify any person. At our meeting, I would like you to explain how each picture relates to your academic and social college experience. I would like to keep these pictures for my research project; I need your permission to do so.

8. I will be providing refreshments as a thank you for taking time to meet with me.

9. Are there any risks in taking part?

There are a couple of risks in taking part in this research. The first is taking pictures which would compromise my responsibilities as a president and your status as a student. If you were to discuss or take pictures of items which were illegal to do or have at the college, I have a legal responsibility to report this. Think in terms of our college policy around the use of alcohol and

drugs. The second risk will be if you bring up information about a negative experience at the college or information in which the law or college policies have not been adhered to. My study is not asking for this type of information. However, I need to inform you, if you disclose information which violates the law and/or college policies, I will need to report this. Prairie Site College Student Policies & Procedures can be accessed at prairie.sitecollege.ca/student_policies_and_procedures. Another risk might be if you talk about a past experience which has been stressful. If this is the case, I will request you stop the interview if you experience any discomfort. I will ensure there is a wellness coordinator on standby, in case you are experiencing discomfort from the topics you have volunteered.

10. Are there any benefits in taking part?

As a researcher, I see you are contributing to research. You are learning and understanding how research methods work. You are experiencing what it is like to be interviewed. You will get an opportunity to use a novel approach to data collection; ‘photo-elicitation.’ From a personal experience, you will have an opportunity develop new understandings and identify on your resume you have taken part in a post-secondary research project.

11. What if you are unhappy or if there is a problem?

“If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let me know by contacting Alice Wainwright-Stewart, contact # 780-853-8563, and I will try to help. If you remain unhappy or have a complaint which you feel you cannot come to me with then, you should contact the Research Governance Officer at ethics@liv.ac.uk or Research Participant Advocate- USA contact # 001-612-312-1210 or email address liverpool.ethics@ohcampus.co. When contacting the Research Governance Officer, please provide details of the name or description of the study (so that it can be identified), the researcher(s) involved, and the details of the complaint you wish to make.”

Or you may contact Red Deer College Ethics Board Chair, Krista Robson, phone: 403-314-2403, email: ethics@rdc.ab.ca

12. Will my participation be kept confidential?

All participant data will be confidential and will be used for this project. The information could be referred to in the future, in the event there is an opportunity to apply for funding to enhance student experiences and/ or in a presentation or conference. The college administrative team will have also have access to the report, but no specific data. The data will be stored for five years after the research is complete. After the five years are complete, data will be shredded.

13. What will happen to the results of the study?

Each participant will be able to review translated interviews to ensure the information is accurate. Once the report is complete, it will be posted as a link on the college website. The report information will be presented to interested groups within the college such as the Executive Team and Board of Governors, who may use the findings to improve current practices. Participants information will not be identifiable from any of the results.

14. What will happen if I want to stop taking part?

Participants are free to withdraw at any time, without explanation. Participants may request their information is destroyed and no further use is made of them. Because the results are anonymised, all personal information can only be withdrawn prior to anonymisation. Anonymisation will take place after translation of the recorded interviews. Report results may be withdrawn up to this period.

15. Whom can I contact if I have further questions?

Principal Investigator.- Alice Wainwright-Stewart , 5707 College Drive, Vermilion, Alberta, T9X 1K5

Appendix B: Consent Form



Committee on Research Ethics

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of Research: Exploring belongingness at a rural college in Northern Alberta

Project: Thesis Research

Researcher(s): Alice Wainwright-Stewart

**Please
initial box**

1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated February 20, 2015, for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my rights being affected. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.
3. I understand that, under the Data Protection Act, I can at any time ask for access to the information I provide and I can also request the destruction of that information if I wish.
4. I agree to take part in the above study.
5. I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me in any publications.
6. I understand and agree that my participation will be audio recorded / and I am aware of and consent to your use of these recordings for the following purposes transcribing the interview.
7. I understand the information from this study will be published as a report; when available the report is available, there will be a link to it on the college website.
8. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I give permission for Alice to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked to the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.

Participant's Name

Date

Signature

Name of person Taking Consent

Date

Signature

Researcher's Name

Date

Signature

Principal Investigator

Name: Alice Wainwright-Stewart
Work Address: 5707 College Drive, Vermilion, Alberta
Work Telephone: 780-853-8563
Work Email: alice.stewart@prairiesitecollege.ca

Student Researcher

Name:
Work Address:
Work Telephone:
Work Email:

Appendix C: Test Interview

Lancaster and Dodd (2004) argue testing or creating a pilot study to 'try out' the anticipated method, provide a method for feedback, and rethinking one's actions. The test interview provided an opportunity to learn, make changes to processes, and anticipate any concerns or problems before engaging in the actual research study. Undertaking this test interview enhanced the interview process. I was able to make changes to the way the photographs were discussed. My objectives were to test the process of implementing photographs, the accuracy of using the iPhone as a recording tool, and dragon software on my iPad as a voice to text recording tool.

The process of implementing photographs. Disposal cameras were brought for each participant, but after using it in the test study, I changed my mind and had participants use their cell phones. The disposable camera proved less than adequate, images were not easy to see, and the processing of the photos was cumbersome. The photos needed to be sent away, and it took more than two weeks to get them back. Despite the foggy looking photographs, taken from the disposable camera, the images did generate conversation, and the participant was able to describe his lived experiences.

The accuracy of using the iPhone. The cell phone was a good recording tool. Participants appeared at ease and did not seem distracted by the iPhone recording. Following my prepared protocol, the participant signed a consent form. The iPhone was positioned in such a way that the participant, if he wanted, could stop the recording. The recording was easy to download to my computer. I have a password on my computer, so this ensured safekeeping of the photos. What I changed after the test interview was numbering each photo and referring to one photo at a time. At the test interview, the participant had all the photos on the table making it difficult to follow his story.

The recording tool. Dragon diction software was implemented to record voice to text. It was less than adequate; although I had practiced training the software to pick up my voice, many of the recorded messages were missing. I was able to cross check some information, but for the most part, I had to listen to the recording again to translate word for word.

Overall thoughts. Preparation time is never wasted, and the interview environment sets the tone for engaging conversations. Even though I thought I was prepared for the test interview (question list, the refreshment bag, and recording instruments), I had forgotten to think about numbering the photos. This made it difficult to take notes when the participant moved from one photo to the next. I also had not considered how the photos were going to be presented. All photos were on the table in front of us in a stack. The participant started arranging and re-arranging the photos as he told the story.

The test interview was an opportunity to test my overall planning skills and provide me with the opportunity to note participant reactions. I found him engaged while sharing his story. After the recording was shut off, he also volunteered to share his knowledge of technology; he explained the pros and cons of microphone usage as well as how to conduct the dictation process. The test interview allowed me to become mentally prepared and practice going through the consent and PIS forms. The objectives set out for the test were accomplished, and the participant indicated the interview was enjoyed. I also found the test interview a positive experience and assisted me in getting ready for the research interviews.

Appendix D: Master Theme Subsumption and Numeration

Master Themes	Super-ordinate Theme	Student	Group #'s	Topic	Subordinate Theme	Emerging Themes	Themes	# of sticky notes
We Belong	We felt at home	Tom Miko Andi Jade Aussie Alex	6/10	Health and well-being Human need (Maslow, 1943)	I felt the environment like home	Small town like feeling	Home away from home Small Town Uniqueness	24 18 18
	We found it easy to form relationships	Tom Miko Andi Jade Larry Aussie Taylor Alex	8/10	Confident Engagement Collaboration	I made connections, helped me form relationships	There was a closeness making it easy to connect	Teamwork Dorm life	20 12
	We experienced a friendly and caring place	Tom Miko And Jack Holly Jade Larry Taylor Aussie Alex	10/10	Sense of belonging Belonging-ness	I felt a part of the college	The place was friendly/ I felt the personal touch of the institution	Social Friends Atmosphere Welcoming environment	9 20 22 18
We Lived the Learning	We developed pride and ownership in our learning	Miko Andi Holly Jade Aussie Taylor Alex	7/10	Empowered Self-actualized Esteem Judgment Motivation Healthy self-concept	I took responsibility for my learning	Clinical, field and lab experiences help us take responsibility	Clubs Specific college activities Hands-on Learning Interacting with friends	18 18 22 5
	We experienced meaningful knowledge and skills	Tom Miko Andi Jack Holly Jade Larry Aussie Taylor Alex	10/10	Authentic learning Doing Real-world relevance Involvement Multiple roles	I found real-world learning meaningful	Hands-on learning and real world bring about learning	Agriculture/ Environment Animals Choices in academic experiences	21 11 13
	We trusted the people in the academic environment	Tom Miko Holly Jade Aussie Alex	6/10	Trust Safe Security Emotions	I trusted others to take risks in learning	Bonding experiences enhance learning	Working with others Partnerships Students' Association	6 6 17

Master Themes	Super-ordinate Theme	Student	Group #'s	Topic	Subordinate Theme	Emerging Themes	Themes	# of sticky notes
We had Life-Changing Experiences	Feeling equally supported we altered our thoughts and actions	Tom Miko Andi Jack Holly Jade Aussie Alex	8/10	Supported Sense of worth Happy Success	As I grew I felt the support of the team	Everyone helps in making learning successful	Faculty listening & working with students Life changing experiences	38 13
	We saw our world from a different perspective	Tom Miko Andi Jack Holly, Jade Larry Aussie Taylor Alex	6/10	Multiple perspectives Cognitive processes	I saw the world differently	Broadening knowledge provides new thoughts	Enhancing one's own health Personal accomplishments	3 16
	We were exposed to new ideas	Tom Miko Andi Jack Holly, Jade Larry Aussie Taylor Alex	7/10	Experiences Reflection	I was able to experience so many new things	Enrichment activities promote change	Learning Meaningful Experiences Awards night Fundraising Gala celebrations	21 22 9 6 8

Appendix E: Interview Protocol and Questions

Recruitment of students

1. Recruiting the student. I will be recruiting students by arranging to go speak to them. I will have both a letter of invitation and the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) to give them. This allows the potential participant at least five days to review the information before making a decision. I will correspond with the student through my student email. If the student agrees to participate, I will set up a meeting date, time and location, where we can meet to discuss the research project and their role in taking pictures. At this meeting, we will discuss using the camera; I will give them a camera and arrange to pick it up after the pictures are taken. We then will set a time and place to go for the interview. Note the location will be either a classroom or meeting room beside the cafeteria.

Pre-meeting

2. When we meet, I will begin by introducing myself. I will advise that I am conducting this research in hopes to gain a better understanding of the social and academic experiences of students at Prairie Site College. I will explain that I am attending the University of Liverpool in a doctoral program in Higher Education. This research is for my thesis. I have been working at the college for thirty years and have reviewed many of the college's surveys, yet during my tenure, I do not recall when students have ever been interviewed. I then will go over the purpose of using the camera. Talk about the social conventions of using the camera. Discuss the need to get pictures which capture the learning, refrain from taking a picture which might compromise our roles within the college. Next, I will explain photo-elicitation. I am requesting each participant to take one to fifteen pictures on the campus which represents their college experience. I will pass out the camera (store bought ones; each participant will have their own). I will request as they take pictures they keep some notes on how they felt when they took the pictures.
3. Ask if there are other questions.
4. Arrange a time to get the camera back to process pictures and set up the interview meeting.

Interview Meeting--The interviewing process:

The interview is a social encounter. It is important to create an environment which puts the participant at ease. I will offer coffee, water or soft drinks.

5. After we have finished with greetings, I will then ask them why they came to college. After this conversation, I will go over the participant information form and the consent form.
6. At this point, I will ask permission to use my iPhone to capture our conversation in order for me to write up a transcript of our discussion. The iPhone is password protected and when the interview information is transcribed my computer is also password protected. If permission is granted, I will remind the participant if, at any time he/she is uncomfortable, I will stop the recording.
7. Have their pictures ready to start our conversation. Have my question sheet handy.

8. Describing the pictures. Ask the participant to tell me about the pictures he/she has taken.

My questions

- a. What thoughts come to you when you think about your experience and view this picture?
 - b. Can you expand on this?
 - c. How long did it take you to settle in as a student? What helped or hindered this process?
 - d. Can you expand on why this was so significant?
 - e. Why did you take this picture?
 - f. What does it represent to you?
 - g. Can you tell me more about this?
 - h. When you think about the experiences you have described, what was the significance of being in the _____ program to that feeling?
 - i. Can you expand on this?
 - j. I noticed you identified coming to the college as a part-time student and now you are a full-time student. Has your day-to-day life changed at the college now you are a full-time student? In what ways?
 - k. What motivates you to learn?
 - l. Can you expand on why this is significant to you?
 - m. Is there any more information you want to include?
9. Thinking about my questions. I need to be sensitive in asking opened-ended questions moving from general comments to more specific details.
 10. Flexibility. I need to be flexible as I listen, be prepared to dig deeper to understand the participant's comments.
 11. Closing off the interview. Is there anything else that you want to add? I appreciate you taking time to have a conversation with me. If I need to clarify any information can I contact you by email? What is your email?
 12. Confidentiality disclosure. I will remind each participant that I will be keeping transcript/records/technology confidential and secure. As well, in order to protect their privacy, each participant will be given a list of non-gender specific names to choose from. I also will place the iPhone in a visible location. Students will be reminded that they will not be identifiable from the data as they will be given a pseudonym.
 13. Ethics of interviewing. I will ensure that I have obtained permission from each participant and the appropriate ethics committees. I will treat all people with respect before, during and after each interview. This means respecting the participant's time, each participant's position and each participant's information.
 14. Presenting information. I will ask each participant to read over the transcript to ensure the information is correct. I will advise each participant when the study is complete there will be a link to the final report on the college website.

15. Thanking participants. Immediately following the interviews, I will provide a handwritten note to each participant thanking them for their time and valuable contribution.

Recording the information

I intend to use an iPhone to record the 45-50 minute semi-structured interviews. I will also keep a pen and paper nearby to jot down information for follow-up. I review the interview notes and transcribe within hours of the conversation. My goal is to use Dragon Naturally Speaking, voice recognition software, to assist me with the recorded information. Once the process is complete, I will return to listen to the recording for any information I may have overlooked. I will re-read the transcription and review for keywords and concepts. To ensure I have heard and transcribed the participant's position correctly, I will email a copy to the participant to verify my translation.

Appendix F: Subsumption

Raw Data	Subsuming Themes	Master Themes
DESCRIBING THE COLLEGE	AMBIENCE OF COLLEGE	WE BELONG
Identifying the atmosphere	A place I can trust	We feel at home
Personal touch of the institution	Easy to engage with others	We found it easy to form relationships
The atmosphere that creates a feeling	Friendly people that care	We experienced a friendly and caring place
IDENTIFYING THE COLLEGE ACTIVITIES	CONNECTIONS WITH LEARNING	WE LIVE THE LEARNING
Being Involved	Hands-on learning	We developed pride and ownership in our learning
Meaningful engagement	Academic experiences	We experienced meaningful knowledge and skills
Family like atmosphere	Bonding Working with faculty	We trusted the people in the academic environment
SUCCEEDING	TRANSFORMING	WE HAD LIFE CHANGING EXPERIENCES
Life changing feelings	Confidence to engage Personal accomplishments	Feeling equally supported we altered our thoughts and actions
Learning new ideas	Experiencing Gaining new understandings	We saw our world from a different perspective
Developing and growing	Seeing a different perspective	We were exposed to new ideas

Appendix G: Glossary

Active Learning-learners are constructors of knowledge; they take an active role in forming new understanding rather than being passive receptors (Grabinger & Dunlap, 1995)

Appreciative Inquiry-a paradigm shift to focus on the strength and successes rather than deficits (Cockell & McArthur-Blair 2012)

Adult Learning-individuals who use their previous knowledge to become more critically reflective of what they see, read and hear (Mezirow, 1991)

Authentic Learning-learning by doing in a variety of settings from experimentation to real-world problem solving (Lombardi, 2007)

Bracketing-the putting aside of taken-for-granted knowledge in order to concentrate on the phenomenon at hand (Smith et al., 2009)

Belongingness-is the need to be and perception of being involved with others at differing interpersonal levels which contributes to one's sense of connectedness (being a part of, feeling accepted, and fitting in), and esteem (being cared about, valued and respected by others), while providing reciprocal acceptance, caring and valuing others. (Levett-Jones et al., 2007, p. 211)

Clinical practice-usually a term in medical learning placements that provides opportunities for professional socialization and experiential learning (Levett-Jones et al., 2009)

Collaborative Learning-an educational approach that aims to create classroom activities that included both academic and social learning (Boruvkova & Emanovsky, 2016)

Community of Practice-situated learning that draws on what is known about a particular subject through culture, history and the social world (Lave, 1991)

Constructivism-in direct opposition to both behaviorism and maturation, the goal of instruction is cognitive development and deep understanding of the focus (Fosnot & Perry 2005)

Community College Survey for Student Engagement (CCSSE)-survey measures effective educational practices. The five benchmarks are the frequency of students' engagement in active and collaborative learning, the level of student effort that is applied to educational activities, the degree of academic challenge, the amount of student-faculty interactions and the institutional support for learners (McClenney, 2001).

Dasein-being-there, an act of being human (Heidegger, 1962)

Hermeneutic-translating everything out of our own sense of life (Dilthey & Jameson, 1972), the theory of interpretation concerned with making meaning (Smith et al., 2009)

Hermeneutic circle-concerned with the relationship between the part and the whole. To understand the part, the whole must be observed, to understand the whole, the part must be observed (Smith et al., 2009)

Idiography-concern with the particular, the detail of an individual's experience (Smith et al., 2009)

Insider researcher-the insider researcher has a dual position within the institution. The role is often referred to as the insider researcher, or worker researcher or practitioner-researcher. The terms appear to be interchangeable. The insider researcher has practical experiences and insider knowledge and a greater awareness of the variables that impact the chosen question. The insider researcher has a privileged role in terms of institutional knowledge, access to information and additional concerns with ethical issues within the research study (Workman, 2007).

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)-a survey designed to assess the extent that students are engaged in empirical derived good educational practices (Kuh, 2001)

Phenomenology-in psychology it is the study of human lived experience (Dowling, 2007)

Photo-elicitation-the idea of inserting photographs into the research interview (Harper, 2002)

Post-secondary-educational experiences after secondary or high school students are identified as adult from 18 years of age or older (Alberta Advanced education, 2012)

Reflexivity-the process of the researcher being aware of all the potential influences and ability to step back and take a critical look at one's own role in the process, being alert, continually critical, scrutinizing all aspects of the research process (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004)







Student Engagement-the student's cognitive investment in their active participation and emotional commitment to their learning (Zepke & Leach, 2010)

Transformational Learning theory-uniquely adult, grounded in the nature of human communication, learning is understood as the process of using prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of one's experience (Taylor, 2008)

Appendix H:

Mapping Main Research Question and Sub-questions

Please note that themes and sub-themes identified in red lettering overlap with research questions.

Research Questions	Master Themes	Sub-Themes	Participant's Perception	Participant's Photographs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do students, who have engaged with the learning opportunities at Prairie Site College, make sense of being engaged in these experiences? 	We Belong	We experience a friendly and caring place	<p>Larry's bonding with others through dinner (Lines 191-199).</p> 	
	We Lived the Learning	We trusted the people in the academic environment	<p>Andi's door that represents the dorm she shared with her roommates, their campus home.</p> <p>Tom feeling comfortable doing new things (lines 58-71).</p>	
		We experienced meaningful knowledge and skills	<p>Mark's experience with the student-managed farm (lines 643-644).</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When students recall their experiences at Prairie Site College what is important to them? 	We Belong	We found it easy to form relationships	<p>Miko's home (lines 283-287).</p> <p>Taylor shooting basketball (lines 35-42).</p>	 

			<p>Jack knows the caretaking staff, it seems I know everyone from the bottom to the top of Prairie Site College (lines 70-89)</p>	
		We felt at home	<p>Alex's home away from home (lines 11-12).</p>	
			<p>It took me longer to fully adapt to a smaller college. I was able to bond with the teachers (Taylor, lines 355-356)</p>	
	We had Life-Changing Experiences	We saw our world from different perspectives	<p>Taylor's exposure to the lambs (Lines 115-127).</p>	
			<p>Jack feeling comfortable in the learning environment (lines 395-390).</p>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What significant factors in academic programs do students identify as engaging? 	<p>We Lived the Learning</p>	<p>We trusted the people in the academic environment</p> <p>We experienced meaningful knowledge and skills</p>	<p>Tom feeling comfortable doing new things (lines 58-71).</p> <p>Miko's potluck dinner experience (lines 155-177).</p> <p>Holly's 3D diagram and tracing pipes (lines 309-324).</p>	   
	<p>We Lived the Learning</p>	<p>We experienced meaningful knowledge and skills</p> <p>We developed pride and ownership in our learning</p>	<p>Jade's fieldtrip experience lines 22-27).</p> <p>Mark's student-managed farm pride and ownership (lines 216-224).</p>	 

Appendix I:

Implementing Photo-Elicitation Within the Research Process

Participants were requested in a pre-interview meeting to take pictures of the college learning experiences that were important to them. The photographs were then sent to me a week before the participants' interviews. Photographs were identified with the participant's name, and each photo was numbered. Each set of pictures were stored in the participant's envelope until his/her interview. All interviews started out with the questions identified in *Figure 4.4--Instructions for the researcher*. After the first question, *why did you choose Prairie Site College* was answered, the first photo was set out as the next question was asked. That question was, *what thoughts come to you when you think about your experience and view this photo?* As the participant told his/her story, photos were set out one at a time.

Photographs were used within the interview to assist each participant in recalling his/her experience. They were then implemented within data analysis process to verify themes. The theme development procedure identified under 4.5 indicated the use of chart paper to group sticky notes which were filled with like themes. Once all sticky notes were placed under each like theme, the photographs were then matched with each corresponding theme. I felt that the images in the photographs provided further evidence of the themes that evolved.